BLAKE CROUCH

THE FEAR TRILOGY

SLOW BOOKS
ABADDON

THE FEAR TRILOGY

Blake Crouch

SNOWBOUND • ABANDON • RUN

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SNOWBOUND

About SNOWBOUND

For Will Innis and his daughter, Devlin, the loss was catastrophic. Every day for the past five years, they wonder where she is, if she is—Will's wife, Devlin's mother—because Rachael Innis vanished one night during an electrical storm on a lonely desert highway, and suspected of her death, Will took his daughter and fled.

Now, Will and Devlin live under different names in another town, having carved out a new life for themselves as they struggle to maintain some semblance of a family.

When one night, a beautiful, hard-edged FBI agent appears on their doorstep, they fear the worst, but she hasn't come to arrest Will. "I know you're innocent," she tells him, "because Rachael wasn't the first…or the last."

Desperate for answers, Will and Devlin embark on a terrifying journey that spans four thousand miles from the desert southwest to the wilds of Alaska, heading unaware into the heart of a nightmare, because the truth is infinitely worse than they ever imagined.

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For Jordan Crouch, I love you, brother

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In September of 2007, my great friend and uncle, Greg “Zig” Crouch, took me to Redoubt Mountain Lodge on Crescent Lake in the heart of Alaska’s Chigmit Mountains. It was one of the best times I’ve ever had, and I am profoundly grateful for that invitation. If there is a more spectacularly scenic place on earth, I haven’t seen it. The isolation and beauty of Redoubt became a huge inspiration for this book.

John Grove also made that trip possible, and Ryan and Heather Richards, who run Redoubt Mountain Lodge, were superb hosts and guides. Neither of them, nor any of the staff or guests who were at Redoubt when I was there are characters in this book. Except for Zig.

A heartfelt thanks to Linda Allen, who went so far above and beyond to get this one off the ground.

Michael Homler, my editor, made this book better in a thousand ways.

Anna Cottle and Mary Alice Kier, as always, provided wise counsel and tireless support.

Anne Gardner at St. Martin’s Press is the best publicist I’ve ever had, and these words are totally insufficient acknowledgment of the hard and brilliant work she has done to spread the word about my books.

And finally, back at base camp, hugs, kisses, and lots of love to Rebecca, Aidan, and my new daughter, Annslee Gray Crouch. I love you.

The Wrong Stars

ONE

In the evening of the last good day either of them would know for years to come, the girl pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped through onto the back porch.

“Daddy?”

Will Innis set the legal pad aside and made room for Devlin to climb into his lap. His daughter was small for eleven, felt like the shell of a child in his arms.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked, and in her scratchy voice he could hear the remnants of her last respiratory infection like gravel in her lungs.

“Working up a close for my trial in the morning.”

“Is your client the bad guy again?”

Will smiled. “You and your mother. I’m not really supposed to think of it that way, sweetheart.”

“What’d he do?” His little girl’s face had turned ruddy in the sunset and the fading light brought out lighter strands in her otherwise-midnight-dark hair.

“He allegedly—”

“What’s that mean?”

“Allegedly?”

“Yeah.”

“Means it’s not been proven. He’s accused of selling drugs.”

“Like what I take?”

“No, your drugs are good. They help you. He was selling, allegedly selling, bad drugs to people.”

“Why are they bad?”

“Because they make you lose control.”

“Why do people take them?”

“They like how it makes them feel.”

“How does it make them feel?”

He kissed her forehead and looked at his watch. “It’s after eight, Devi. Let’s go bang on those lungs.”

She sighed but didn’t argue. She never tried to get out of it.

He stood up, cradling his daughter, and walked over to the redwood railing.

They stared into the wilderness that bordered Oasis Hills, their subdivision. The houses on No-Water Lane had the Sonoran Desert for a backyard.

“Look,” he said. “See them?” A half mile away, specks filed out of an arroyo and trotted across the desert toward a shadeless forest of giant saguaro cacti that looked vaguely sinister profiled against the horizon.

“What are they?” she asked.

“Coyotes. What do you bet they start yapping after the sun goes down?”

When Devlin had gotten into bed, he read to her from *A Wrinkle in Time*. They’d been working their way through the penultimate chapter, “Aunt Beast,” but Devlin was exhausted and drifted off before Will had finished the second page.

He closed the book, set it on the carpet, and turned out the light. Cool desert air flowed in through an open window. A sprinkler whispered in the next-door neighbor’s yard. Devlin yawned, made a cooing sound that reminded him of rocking her to sleep as a newborn. Her eyes fluttered and she said softly, “Mom?”

“She’s working late at the clinic, sweetheart.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“Few hours.”

“Tell her to come in and kiss me?”

“I will.”

He was nowhere near ready for court in the morning, but he stayed, running his fingers through Devlin’s hair until she’d fallen back to sleep. Finally, he slid carefully off the bed and walked out onto the deck to gather up his books and legal pads. He had a late night ahead of him. A pot of strong coffee would help.

Next door, the sprinklers had gone quiet.

A lone cricket chirped in the desert.

Thunderless lightning sparked somewhere over Mexico, and the coyotes began to scream.

TWO

The thunderstorm caught up with Rachael Innis thirty miles north of the Mexican border. It was 9:30 P.M., and it had been a long day at the free clinic in Sonoyta, where she volunteered her time and services once a week as a bilingual psychologist. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth. High beams lighted the steam rising off the pavement, and glancing in the rearview mirror, Rachael saw the pair of headlights a quarter of a mile back that had been with her for the last ten minutes.

Glowing beads suddenly appeared on the shoulder just ahead. She jammed her foot into the brake pedal, the Grand Cherokee fishtailing into the oncoming lane before skidding to a stop. A doe and her fawn ventured into the middle of the road, mesmerized by the headlights. Rachael let her forehead fall onto the steering wheel, closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath.

The deer moved on. She accelerated the Cherokee, another dark mile passing as pellets of hail hammered the hood.

The Cherokee veered sharply toward the shoulder and she nearly lost control again, trying to correct her bearing, but the steering wheel wouldn't straighten out. Rachael lifted her foot off the gas pedal and eased over onto the side of the road.

When she killed the engine, all she could hear were the rain and hail drumming on the roof. The car that had been following her shot by. She set her glasses on the passenger seat, opened the door, and stepped down into a puddle that engulfed her pumps. The downpour soaked through her black suit. She shivered. It was pitch-black between lightning strikes and she moved forward carefully, feeling her way along the warm metal of the hood.

A slash of lightning hit the desert just a few hundred yards out. It set her body tingling, her ears ringing. *I'm going to be electrocuted.* There came a train of earsplitting strikes, flashbulbs of electricity that illuminated the sky just long enough for her to see that the tires on the driver's side were still intact.

Her hands trembled now. A tall saguaro stood burning like a cross in the desert. She groped her way over to the passenger side as marble-size hail collected in her hair. The desert was electrified again, spreading wide and empty all around her.

In the eerie blue light, she saw that the front tire on the passenger side was flat.

Back inside the Cherokee, Rachael sat behind the steering wheel, mascara trailing down her cheeks like sable tears. She wrung out her long black hair and massaged her temples, trying to alleviate the headache building between them. Her purse lay on the floor on the passenger side. She dragged it into her lap and shoved her hand inside, rummaging for the cell phone. She found it, tried her husband's number, but there was no service in the storm.

Rachael looked into the back of the Cherokee at the spare. She had no way of contacting AAA, and passing cars would be few and far between on this remote highway at this hour of the night. *I'll just wait and try Will again when the storm has passed.*

Squeezing the steering wheel, she stared through the windshield into the stormy darkness, somewhere north of the border in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. *Middle of nowhere.*

There was a brilliant streak of lightning. In the split-second illumination, she saw a black Escalade parked a hundred yards up the shoulder.

Thunder rattled the windows. Five seconds elapsed. When the sky exploded again, Rachael felt a strange, unnerving pull to look through the driver's side window.

A man swung a crowbar through the glass.

THREE

Will startled back into consciousness, disoriented and thirsty. It was so quiet—just the discreet drone of a computer fan and the second hand of the clock ticking in the adjacent bedroom. He found himself slouched in the leather chair at the desk in his small home office, the CPU still purring, the monitor switched into sleep mode.

As he yawned, everything rushed back in a torrent of anxiety. He'd been hammering out notes for his closing argument and hit a wall at ten o'clock. The evidence was damning. He was going to lose. He'd closed his eyes only for a moment to clear his head.

He reached for the mug of coffee and took a sip. Winced. It was cold and bitter. He jostled the mouse. When the screen blinked back on, he looked at the clock and realized he wouldn't be sleeping anymore tonight. It was 4:09 A.M. He was due in court in less than five hours.

First things first—he needed an immediate and potent infusion of caffeine.

His office adjoined the master bedroom at the west end of the house, and passing through on his way to the kitchen, he noticed a peculiar thing. He'd expected to see his wife buried under the myriad quilts and blankets on their bed, but she wasn't there. The comforter was smooth and taut, undisturbed since they'd made it up yesterday morning.

He walked through the living room and into the den, then down the hallway. Rachael had probably come home, seen him asleep at his desk, and gone in to kiss Devlin. She'd have been exhausted from working all day at the clinic. She'd probably fallen asleep in there. He could picture the night-light glow on their faces as he reached his daughter's door.

It was cracked, exactly as he'd left it seven hours ago when he'd put Devlin to bed.

He eased the door open. Rachael wasn't with her.

Will, wide awake now, closed Devlin's door and headed back into the den.

"Rachael? You here, hon?"

He went to the front door, turned the dead bolt, stepped outside.

Dark houses. Porch lights. Streets still wet from the thunderstorms that had blown through several hours ago. No wind, the sky clearing, bright with stars.

When he saw them in the driveway, his knees gave out and he sat down on the steps and tried to remember how to breathe. One Beamer, no Jeep Cherokee, and a pair of patrol cars, two uniformed officers coming toward him, their hats shelved under their arms.

The patrolmen sat on the couch in the living room, Will facing them in a chair. The smell of new paint was still strong. He and Rachael had redone the walls and the vaulted ceiling in terra-cotta last weekend. Most of the black-and-white desert photographs that usually adorned the room still leaned against the antique chest of drawers, waiting to be rehung.

The lawmen were businesslike in their delivery, taking turns with the details, as if they'd rehearsed who would say what, their voices so terribly measured and calm.

There wasn't much information yet. Rachael's Cherokee had been found on the shoulder of Arizona 85 in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Right front tire flat, punctured with a nail to cause a slow and steady loss of air pressure. Driver's side window busted out.

No Rachael. No blood.

They asked Will a few questions. They tried to sympathize. They said how sorry they were as Will just stared at the floor, a tightness in his chest constricting his windpipe in a slow strangulation.

He happened to look up at some point, saw Devlin standing in the hall in a plain pink T-shirt that fell all the way to the carpet, the tattered blanket she'd slept with every night since her birth draped over her left arm. And he could see in her eyes that she'd heard every word the patrolmen had said about her mother, because they were filling up with tears.

FOUR

Rachael Innis was strapped upright with two-inch webbing to the leather seat behind the driver. She stared at the console lights. The digital clock read 4:32 A.M. She remembered the crowbar through the window and nothing after.

Bach's Four Lute Suites blared from the Bose stereo system, John Williams playing classical guitar. Beyond the windshield, the headlights cut a feeble swath of light through the darkness, and even though she was riding in a luxury SUV, the shocks did little to ease the violent jarring from whatever primitive road they traveled.

Her wrists and ankles were comfortably but securely bound with nylon restraints. Her mouth wasn't gagged. From her vantage point, she could only see the back of the driver's head and occasionally the side of his face by the cherry glow of his cigarette. He was smooth-shaven, his hair was dark, and he smelled of a subtle, spicy cologne.

It occurred to her that he didn't know she was awake, but the thought wasn't two seconds old when she caught his eyes in the rearview mirror. They registered her consciousness, flickered back to the road.

They drove on. An endless stream of rodents darted across the road ahead, and a thought kept needling her: At some point, he was going to stop the car and do whatever he was driving her out in the desert to do.

"Have you urinated on my seat?" She thought she detected the faintest accent.

"No."

"You tell me if you have to urinate. I'll stop the car."

"Okay. Where are you—"

"No talking. Unless you have to urinate."

"I just—"

"You want your mouth taped? You have a cold. That would make breathing difficult."

Devlin was the only thing she'd ever prayed for, and that was years ago, but as she watched the passing sagebrush and cactus through the deeply

tinted windows, she pleaded with God again.

Now the Escalade was slowing. It came to a stop. He turned off the engine, stepped outside, and shut the door. Her door opened. He stood watching her. He was very handsome, with flawless brown skin (save for an indentation in the bridge of his nose), liquid blue eyes, and black hair greased back from his face. His pretty teeth seemed to gleam in the night. Rachael's chest heaved against the strap of webbing.

He said, "Calm down, Rachael." Her name sounded like a foreign word on his lips. He took out a syringe from his black leather jacket and uncapped the needle.

"What is that?" she asked.

"You have nice veins." He ducked into the Escalade and turned her arm over. When the needle entered, she gasped.

"Please. If this is some kind of ransom—"

"No, no. You've already been purchased. In fact, right now, there isn't a safer place in the world for you to be than in my possession."

A gang of coyotes erupted in demonic howls somewhere out in that empty dark. Rachael thought they sounded like a woman burning alive, and she began to scream until the drug took her.

FIVE

They started arriving after four o’clock in the afternoon. By five, Rachael’s disappearance was the lead story on all the local news stations, even in Tucson and Phoenix. When six rolled around, there were more cars parked along No-Water Lane than when the Hasslers had hosted their last Fourth of July barbecue.

Come 7:15 P.M., more than forty people had crowded into Will and Rachael’s modest adobe home in Ajo, Arizona. They packed the den, the living room, the kitchen, even spilling out onto the deck. It was a strange assembly, all these people drawn to a tragedy in the making. The ambience mirrored the hushed formality of a postfuneral gathering, with the glut of food and alcohol, whispered conversations, the absence of laughter. And it struck Will as he sat on the sofa holding Devlin, surrounded by those he loved, friends he’d not seen in years, neighbors he rarely spoke to, that these people had come to hold vigil with him. They were waiting to hear that she’d been found, though everyone knew that people weren’t found alive when they went missing near the border, if they were ever found at all.

“Will?” He broke from his trance and looked up at Rachael’s mother standing by the built-in bookshelves, a glass of bourbon in her hand.

Debra bore a strong resemblance to her daughter, right down to her trim figure and black hair. From across the room, they could’ve been mistaken for sisters. Closer up, her silver roots showed and the added decades of living in these desert borderlands and the punishment of the sun became evident in the leathering of her face, which more resembled hide than skin.

“I couldn’t remember if you took ice or not,” she said.

“Yeah, I do. That’s perfect.” She handed him his fourth Maker’s of the evening.

“Can I take her?” Debra motioned to her granddaughter, who had fallen asleep in Will’s arms, and he’d have let her, but she was near bulletproof with Valium and vodka.

“I need to hold her, Mom.” As he sipped the whiskey, his face flushed with heat and he theorized through the bourbon-embroidered fog that

maybe Rachael's funeral had already happened and he'd blocked everything out—the eulogies, the stern-faced pallbearers, his daughter in hysterics as she watched her mother's casket being lowered into the ground.

He staggered to his feet and carried Devlin back to her bedroom. She was beyond exhaustion now. So was he. He tucked her in, knelt on the floor, spent several moments watching her sleep, feeling a sharp pinch in his gut every time he breathed. After awhile, he got up, headed for his bedroom. His and Rachael's bedroom. He shut and locked the door after him, opened the sweater chest that stood at the foot of their bed.

He found it near the bottom—a tattered sweatshirt that Rachael wore religiously when the weather turned cooler. It was navy blue and had years ago evinced the name of her alma mater, the washing machine having long since stripped away the white lettering.

He brought the sweatshirt to his face and smelled his wife.

On his way back to the den, he stopped at the guest room. Someone sobbed loudly behind the door. He opened it. There were no lights on, but as his eyes adjusted, he discerned the ponderous form of Rachael's sister, Elise, curled up in the corner beside a dresser.

"You all right?" he asked. It took her a moment to catch her breath. Looking out the window above her head, he noticed strange lights in the front yard.

"She's dead, Will. I can feel it." He shut his eyes and braced against the concussion of her words, could have struck her for giving voice to the malignant prediction on all of their minds. "Can't *you* feel it, Will?" He closed the door and went back into the den, grabbed his whiskey from the end table.

One giant swallow and he'd reinforced that beautiful cushion that was padding him from reality, the room humming now, just a few sips shy of spinning.

He was en route to the front door to investigate those lights in the yard when someone caught him under the arm.

"Hey, Will. You hanging in there, guy?" He couldn't recall the man's name, and then he realized why. It was a neighbor, but they'd never met.

Will recognized him only because the man was usually washing a white Lexus in his driveway on Saturday mornings whenever Will and Rachael drove past his house on the way to the gym.

He was Will's age, Latino.

"I'm sorry, what's your name?" Will asked.

"Miguel. We always exchange waves when you and your wife pass by my house. I saw the news, all the cars out there. Thought I should come by. If there's anything I can do. . . ."

Will could feel his eyes welling, and whether it was prompted by the whiskey or the totality of this terrible day, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the kindness of this man he knew only through gestures.

"Thank you, Miguel." He wiped his eyes, cleared his throat. "Why don't you go get something to eat, something to drink. They've got a whole buffet thing going in the kitchen."

When Miguel was gone, Will opened the front door and stepped onto the porch.

He whispered, "Oh God." The cushion evaporated. The crushing load of Rachael's absence ripped the breath out of him and he crumpled down on the steps, thinking, *So this is really happening.* It had become a parking lot out in the street. He spotted a news van one block over, a large satellite dish perched on its roof. And in the long grass of the front lawn, a dozen people stood in a circle between the yuccas and saguaros, their faces lighted by the candles in their hands, flames quivering in the evening wind blowing in from the desert.

He sat watching the circle of flames, the sky deepening into dusk, his stomach hurting so much that he could manage only the shallowest of breaths as he strained to hear their words.

A woman's voice reached him: "Dear Lord, You say that where two or more are gathered in Your name that You are present. Well, here we are Lord, and we're asking for the deliverance of Rachael Innis."

He struggled to his feet and stumbled toward them through the grass. He hadn't prayed in years, since they'd found out their daughter was sick. A standoff fuckoff with God. That ended tonight.

SIX

Will slipped away from the circle of candles and started back toward the house to check on Devlin. Though he'd wanted to, he hadn't prayed aloud. It had been a long time and he was rusty at talking to God, particularly in the presence of strangers.

As he reached to open the front door, it swung back. Rachael's mother was standing on the threshold, distraught.

"There's a detective in the living room, Will. He wants to talk to you."

For some reason, Will had expected a younger man, perhaps his age, with a buzz cut and stern, distrusting eyes. Having dealt with many cops as a defense attorney, he'd come to regard them as authority junkies, an unimaginative and reactionary bunch prone to forming fast, unmovable opinions. But at first glance, the detective on his couch proved none of his prejudices. The man was sitting between two of Rachael's girlfriends from yoga class, his hands flattened out on his knees, gazing with a Zen-like calm at a framed photograph over the mantel—a picture from their Grand Canyon vacation two summers ago. He was an older, clean-shaven gentleman with stark white hair and clear blue eyes, and when he saw Will, he rose to his feet, buttoned his jacket, and flashed an appropriately restrained smile.

"Mr. Innis," he said as they shook hands. "Detective Teddy Swicegood. You've cross-examined me in court a few times, if I'm not mistaken. But don't worry. Won't hold it against you. I'm so sorry to be here under these circumstances."

He had at least four inches on Will, and his wizened face belied the strength of his handshake and the lean, solid build beneath the Sears suit.

"You have news?" Will asked.

"It's pretty crowded in here. There someplace we can talk in private?"

"Yeah. You want a drink?"

"I wouldn't object to a whiskey."

Will poured a pair of whiskies and led Swicegood through the sliding glass door. There were a half dozen people on the deck, most of whom he

didn’t recognize, sitting on chairs dragged out from the breakfast table and eating off paper plates like they were at a cookout.

The two men walked down the steps and crossed the grass to a weathered fence that ran the length of No-Water Lane and separated the backyards of Oasis Hills from the desert.

Will leaned on the fence, steeling himself, and said, “Just tell me. Don’t beat around—”

“We’ve got APBs out everywhere across the Southwest and we’re working with the Mexican authorities, as well.”

“You haven’t found her?”

Swicegood shook his head.

“But you think she’s alive.”

“I don’t know.”

“Your opinion?”

“Mr. Innis, it’s just too early to be—”

“Please. Take off the fucking kid gloves.”

“That’s a bad stretch of highway she disappeared on. Notorious for drug running, human trafficking. It doesn’t look good.”

The words hit Will like drops of acid, and it struck him that following a tragedy, grief comes in waves, each bigger than the previous, each carrying a new component of pain. They stood there drinking bourbon, looking south across the desert toward Mexico, where only a tinge of light lingered in the sky, lying across the horizon like the last thread of day.

Then it vanished and stars appeared, numerous and vivid. A coyote cried. He heard the rustling of a large animal, probably a mule deer, running through the sage. Will thought about Rachael, somewhere out there, maybe alive, maybe not, and he knew he wasn’t even close to the pain yet. But he could sense it lurking on the outskirts. It would be waiting for him in the morning when he opened his eyes to face this nightmare all over again.

A match flared. Swicegood lighted a cigarette, blew out the flame. He licked his thumb and forefinger and squelched the heat from the glowing match head before flicking it into the grass. He took a deep drag and sent a train of smoke curling into the desert.

“I was wondering, Mr. Innis, is there someone who could watch your daughter for a little while?” Will had been leaning on the fence. Now he

turned and faced the detective. His head wasn't clear. It took a moment to locate the exact words he wanted.

"Why would she need to be watched?"

"I thought you and I could ride over to the station. Have a little talk."

The air between them turned electric.

"What about?"

"I'll be waiting in my car. It's parked behind the news truck with the satellite on top. You go make sure your daughter's taken care of, then come on out."

Will knocked back the whiskey and set the empty glass on the fence post. The darkness seemed to tilt. He felt clammy, sweat beading on his face.

"Shit." He staggered ten feet away and retched into the grass, stood hunched over, looking back toward the house at all the silhouettes moving like ghosts behind the windows. He took in the dark stillness of the desert, the wet chill of the grass blades brushing at his bare ankles. He wiped his mouth. "You're serious?" he asked.

"I am."

"Do I need to bring a lawyer?"

"I don't see why at this point. I just need you to answer a few questions. Help me sort something out. So, my car. Five minutes."

SEVEN

Javier wanted coffee—strong and scalding—and as if his desire had conjured its own object, the sign for a freestanding Starbucks appeared a quarter mile ahead, beside a gas station just off the interstate.

It made him nervous, leaving the woman alone, but she was reasonably secure, more than reasonably drugged, and if he was going to reach Idaho without drifting off and killing them both, caffeine would be required.

Into Starbucks and the intimate odor of the beans and the chromed shine of mugs, French presses, and espresso machines as world music throbbed through speakers in the ceiling.

He counted nine people in line ahead of him.

Rachael floated in a warm, dark sea. It seemed to take years just to open her eyes, and when she did, the world was awash in blinding streaks of light, echoes of jumbled sounds. She moaned softly, though not from pain, but a burning euphoria.

She sat in the front seat of the Escalade, restrained only by a seat belt. The car was stationary but idling. She managed to rotate her head toward the empty driver’s seat.

Looking through the tinted window in front of her, she tried to get a handle on her surroundings, but the slightest movement blurred light and distorted objects beyond recognition. With her head swimming, it took extraordinary willpower to keep her thoughts from derailing into dreamy and meaningless directions. She possessed a dim awareness that she was in trouble, but she couldn’t remember what kind, or the events that had preceded this moment. All she knew was that she needed to get out of the car before the driver came back.

As Rachael stilled herself, the outside world eased into focus. She made out the bright lights of a familiar chain, the Escalade parked near the entrance.

Inside, she spotted a line to the cash register. The man who had been driving the Escalade stood at the end, watching her.

From his place in line, Javier had a view through the storefront glass, saw the woman was no longer draped unconscious in the front passenger seat, but struggling to sit up.

A customer collected her drink, the line shuffling forward.

The next couple ordered lattes and items from the pastry case, beside which he now stood, watching the hands of the heavyset barista reaching for two pieces of crumb cake.

He glanced outside. The woman was looking down, having probably noticed what he'd done to the seat belt.

Next customer, a truck driver.

"Just coffee, darlin'."

Good man.

Then a woman after some high-end water, a twenty-second transaction, swipe of the credit card, Javier feeling a jolt of anticipatory excitement at the caffeine coming his way and getting back on the road again, as that redneck with the braids loved to sing.

She reached to undo the seat belt, but the button had been wrapped several times in duct tape. Too groggy and weak to tear it off, she lifted her arm instead, and on the fourth attempt, she touched the switch on her door that lowered the automatic window.

The tinted glass descended quickly into the door. Night air swept in, reeking of gas and oil. In the near distance, an interstate droned with the ceaseless hum of traffic. The air was far too cool for southern Arizona, and through the fog of the drug, she wondered how far she was from home.

Just a family ahead of him now—mom and dad, teenage girl, young boy who'd been stealing glances at Jav ever since he'd walked into the store.

Dad: coffee.

Boy: hot chocolate.

Girl: latte.

Javier glanced at his Escalade, saw the window sliding down on the passenger side.

Mom: "I'll have an iced, skinny, venti, ten-pump chai latte, hold the whip."

Javier glared in the general direction of the register as a tremor of murderous irritation pulsed between his temples.

The barista, grinning, said, “Could you say that one more time, and just a tad slower.”

“Iced. Skinny. Venti. Chai latte. Ten pumps. Hold the whip.”

“I have to charge you for the extra pumps.”

“That’s fine.”

“It’s my second day, so let me be sure. When you say ‘skinny,’ you mean __”

“Nonfat milk.”

The barista grimaced, bracing for the deliverance of bad news. “We just ran out.”

“Oh no.” Mom slumped in devastation as Javier calculated that his BP had risen to 130/90, the tips of his ears tingling.

“We have two percent.”

“How about one?”

“Sorry.”

“What if you made it with water?”

“Water?”

“Instead of steamed milk.”

“Um, I’ve never heard of doing that, but I guess I could. You’re the customer, right?”

It wasn’t going to stay inside like he’d hoped, and he knew enough about himself to realize that if he just stood there watching the fuse burn down, he’d end up doing something combustive and reckless, like that time in Juárez.

Javier opened his mouth, not to say what he really wanted, just to cool himself off, a quick pressure release to get things back to baseline.

“Have you ever tried coffee?” he asked brightly, the family turning as one to see who’d spoken. Javier smiled, felt the hate exuding through his teeth, hoped it overshot them. “They have their Anniversary Blend available tonight. And all you have to say is, ‘Anniversary Blend, please.’ None of this complicated ordering. And do you know what? All the barista has to do is take a cup, or a mug if it’s for here, and fill it up. And then you are done and the next person can order.”

“I’m taking a long time, aren’t I?” the mom said. “I’m sorry.”

“This is your favorite drink?”

“Guilty as charged. I have two chai lattes a day.”

“Ah.”

“May I buy your coffee? For the inconvenience?” He couldn’t tell if she meant that she was really sorry, or that he was a giant asshole, but he admired her for treading the line so well, even as he despised her.

“No, thank you.”

A family emerged from Starbucks, carrying a tray of drinks.

Rachael leaned over and hung her arms out the window, resting her chin against the strip of weatherproofing. She raised an arm, let it drop with a bang against the door.

The adults had already passed by without noticing her.

She raised her arm, let it bang again. The young boy glanced back, and when he saw her, he stopped, his eyes narrowing.

Help me. He cocked his head and stared at her. Rachael’s face was lying against the door, her skin milky, sweating, her eyes crossed.

“Help me,” she mouthed.

The boy approached the door.

“Help me,” she whispered. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

“You look funny,” he said. “What’s wrong with your eyes?”

Rachael fought to keep them from rolling back in her head.

“Donnie, let’s go, pal! You’re holding up progress!”

“Dad, there’s something wrong with this woman!”

Oh thank you. Thank you. Rachael was on the brink of losing consciousness again, the heroin raging through her blood. She lost the boy to swirls of trailing light, made her eyes bring him back into focus. He looked to be Devlin’s age, and now a man was standing beside him, looking down at her, his brow furrowed. He was soft and round, a young father yet to shed his baby fat, filling out his khaki shorts and yellow polo shirt. His mouth was moving, but it took her a moment to connect the movement of his lips to the sounds they made.

“. . . need a doctor or something?” *Get me out of here.* “. . . person who’s driving you inside?” *Oh God. Please.* “. . . can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

The brown-skinned, blue-eyed man who’d taken her walked up behind the boy and his father.

Rachael tried to lift her eyes from his boots—they appeared to have been fashioned from the pebbled black-and-yellow skin of Gila monsters.

The boy said, “What’s wrong with her?”

Javier smiled. “It’s a personal matter, son.” He stepped between them and gently lifted Rachael’s head off the door, kissing her cheek as he did. “Let’s go back to sleep now, honey.” Rachael moaned, fighting him with everything she had, which wasn’t anything. He opened the door, raised the window, shut the door. When he turned back around, the boy and his father were still standing there. The window lowered again.

Rachael said, “Help me,” and groaned loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“What’s going on here?” the boy’s father asked.

Javier sighed, looked down for a moment, studying an oil stain on the concrete.

“What’s going on,” he said finally, “is that my wife is addicted to heroin. She’s loaded right now. This far”—he held his thumb and forefinger an inch apart—“from a lethal overdose. I’m driving her to a detox program in Salt Lake.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That must be so difficult.”

“It is. I can only take it a day at a time.”

“We’re sorry to have disturbed her. Come on, Donnie.”

“But she asked for help, Dad.”

Javier squatted down, stared at the boy.

He’d already identified all of the exterior surveillance cameras.

“I want you to remember this night always,” he said. “Because that”—he jerked his thumb back toward the window as Rachael banged her arm against the side of the door—“is what drugs can do to you.”

“God bless,” the boy’s father said, and he took his son by the shoulders and guided him back toward a minivan parked on the far side of the gas pumps.

Javier climbed behind the steering wheel of the Escalade. He looked at Rachael, who was slumped forward into the dash.

“Do you have any idea what you just did?” he said.

Inside the minivan, Rick Carter was distributing the Starbucks beverages to his wife and children. He had a long night of driving ahead of him, and with a little luck and no delays, they’d arrive in Albuquerque some time tomorrow afternoon.

He’d just swallowed his first sip when he heard a knock at his window.

He turned, saw the man from the Escalade standing there, felt a small knot blossom in his stomach. For half a second, he debated just putting the car into gear and pulling away.

“What do you think he wants?” his wife asked.

“Guess we’ll find out.” He lowered his window several inches. “May I help you?”

Javier glanced at the children in the backseat, at the man’s pretty wife. The car smelled of Starbucks.

“Do you have a cell phone with you?” Javier asked.

“Yeah, do you need to—”

“Have you called nine one one?”

“Um, no, why would—”

“You’re sure?”

“Look, I don’t understand what you’re—”

Javier jerked the door open and shot the man in the face, fired two quick bursts into the backseat to silence the screaming, and stared at the woman, who’d crushed her recycled cup in her left hand, the burning chai steaming off her fist.

“Enjoying your iced, skinny, venti, ten-pump chai latte, hold the whip?”

He shot her in the throat and shut the door.

EIGHT

They didn’t speak on the short ride to the Pima County Sheriff’s Department, and the building was practically deserted when they arrived. Swicegood led Will past the unattended reception desk, down a hallway, and stopped in front of a door with stenciled white letters that read INTERVIEW 1. Inside were a small table, three chairs, and a tape recorder. A video camera angled down from one of the corners in the ceiling, the lens pointed at the table.

Swicegood said, “Get you some water? Coffee?”

“I just want to get this over with and get back to my daughter.”

“Sure.” Swicegood eased down into a chair across from Will, tossed a thin file on the table. Will was sobering up fast, his heart beating wildly in his chest. “I’m going to record this,” Swicegood said, starting the tape recorder. “You’re aware of your rights?”

“Of course I am.” Swicegood went through them anyway, and when he’d finished, Will said, “I waive those rights.”

Swicegood leaned forward. “You’re an officer of the court, correct?”

“You know I am.”

Swicegood smiled. “I wonder if you could just clear something up for me. Your wife never came home last night, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“You said she was working at a clinic in Sonoyta.”

“Yeah.”

“What time was she due back?”

“Between ten and ten-thirty.”

“Okay, so here’s my question. At what point does a loving husband become concerned when his wife doesn’t come home?”

“I don’t understand what—”

“When she’s an hour late?”

“Look—”

“Two? Three? Four hours?”

“Okay, I see where you’re going—”

“I suppose for you, it’s somewhere beyond the six hour-mark, but we’ll never know, because you never called nine one one, did you?”

“Would you let me explain?”

“Please do.”

“I was supposed to do closing arguments at a trial this morning. I was up late last night working on them.”

“How late?”

“I fell asleep after ten, at my desk. When I woke up, it was four. I went looking for her in the house. I was horrified. Highway Patrol showed up before I had a chance to call nine one one.”

Swicegood inched closer. “Will, I’ve been a detective going on thirty years now. And crimes? They’re always emotional. You’ve represented some of the lowlifes I’ve put away, and you know that in the heat of the moment, when rage and adrenaline take over, criminals do stupid, stupid things. So I just have one question for you. Did you make any mistakes?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“You think you did it perfectly, don’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve got a million-point-five life-insurance policy on your wife.”

“My daughter has cystic fibrosis. If something were to—”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but still, quite a chunk of change. How was your marriage, Will?”

“Good. Great.”

“Really? Because I spoke with the next-door neighbors this evening. The Tomlins told me you two put on quite a show on your back porch several nights ago. Shouting, swearing, the works.”

“You’ve never had a fight with your wife? Congratulations.”

“What was it about? The fight.”

“Money.”

“Money.”

“Things are tight. You have any idea what health insurance costs for someone like my daughter, who has a terminal disease? It can stress a marriage.”

“Well, it won’t be a problem anymore, will it?”

“What?”

“Money.”

Swicegood got up without a word, turned off the tape recorder, left the room. When the door closed, Will looked at his watch: 10:47 P.M. His hands shook. His throat closed off.

He's trying to pin this on you. You could lose your wife and *daughter.* His eyes ran over as it hit him—Devi could become an orphan. What broke him more than anything, even the prospect of prison and what would happen to someone like him on the inside, was the possibility that he wouldn't be there for his daughter when the disease finally claimed her. The reality that Devlin would probably die within the next five years was something he looked square in the eye every day. But what he imagined as he sat in that interview room was a dismal morning several years in the future at the maximum-security facility in Florence. A guard would walk down the long corridor to his cell, rouse him, tell him through the bars that his daughter had passed away in the night. He couldn't fathom anything worse than that. *Devi is not dying alone. You cannot let that happen. She is your purpose. Your heart.*

The door to the interview room opened. Swicegood sat down across from Will, set a steaming Styrofoam cup of coffee on the table.

He said, "Before we continue, let me say this. This is my job. I operate on instinct. Go where it says go. That's what I'm doing right now. If you didn't have anything to do with this, I am so, so sorry. All right, back to business."

He started the recorder, seemed softer, calmer. Will straightened himself in the chair.

"Look at me, Will." Everything faded into a distorted darkness except for Swicegood's eyes. They worked like magnets on Will's, holding his gaze, his focus, with such intensity that it hurt him to blink. "Somewhere inside of you," the detective said, "you want to tell me the truth. Been doing this a long time. I've seen it in many pairs of eyes, and I see it in yours." His voice had dropped in pitch and evened out into a soothing monotone that might have lulled Will toward sleep were it not for those blue magnets. "Do you know how good it would feel to just say it, Will? The relief? You know how much easier it would make things for you and your daughter? You're young. You talk to me now, we might have some wiggle room with the DA." Will felt the gravitational force of the detective's eyes trying to coax something out of him. The air buzzed with Swicegood's desire to hear it,

and Will suddenly understood how a person could make a false confession. Anything to make that buzzing stop. “But once I’ve got a body, Will, it’s over for you. Life. Or maybe they strap you to the execution table in Florence, put a needle in your arm. I hope you buried her deep, because the coyotes will find her. Sniff out the rot. Dig her up. And someone will stumble across the bones, and that’ll be that. But I don’t need the body. You know why? Because everyone knows she’s dead. And the little secret about juries? About society? They want closure. Wrongs righted. Threads tied up. People like you swept away into prison, out of sight, so they don’t have to think about depravity while they’re tucking their little ones into bed at night. You want to take a chance on a jury? You want to stand there on verdict day, your knees quaking, your life, your daughter’s, in the hands of twelve strangers who might be willing to trade reasonable doubt for closure? You up for that, Will?”

Will stood up, trembling with rage. He didn’t know if his wife was alive or dead, and this man was accusing him of her murder.

“I didn’t kill my wife, and I don’t know where any of this is coming from. You charging me, Teddy?”

“Where’d you bury her?”

“Are you charging me?”

Swicegood cleared his throat. “I’ll be talking to the DA first thing in the __”

“Then I’m done here. Am I free to go?”

Swicegood chewed his bottom lip. “For the moment.”

“Take me home right now. I don’t want my daughter waking up and not finding me there.”

Swicegood stopped the recorder. When he pushed his chair back, the Styrofoam cup tipped over, black coffee spilling across the table, falling in a thin dark stream onto the floor.

NINE

Will whispered into his daughter's ear, "Wake up, Devi." She stirred, turned away from him. He sat her up in bed. In the blue glow of the night-light, he watched her eyes open slowly.

She looked around the room, then looked at her father. "Where's Mom?"

"She isn't here, honey. Now listen, this is important. We're gonna get you dressed now."

"But it isn't morning yet."

"I know. We're going on a special trip."

"Where?"

"No more questions."

In the darkness, Will helped his daughter dress.

"I'm going to carry you," he said. "I need you to be very quiet. Don't make a sound."

He picked her up, walked to the bedroom door, and slowly pulled it open. The hallway was dark, quiet. He crept down it, heard Rachael's mother snoring in the guest room.

Rachael's sister, Elise, was asleep on the sofa in the den. The creak of the front door opening made her shift, but she didn't wake.

Three A.M is one of the few comfortable hours in Ajo in the summertime, a cool, fleeting reprieve. The Beamer's trunk was already packed with suitcases. Will put Devlin in the front seat, buckled her in. He climbed behind the wheel, shifted into neutral, let the car roll silently to the end of the driveway before shoving the key into the ignition.

"Where are we going, Daddy?" Will looked at his daughter, shook his head in disbelief at all that had changed in twenty-four hours, at how quickly, when the wrong stars align, it all comes apart. *You will not die alone.*

"I don't know yet," he said. And he turned the key and put the car into gear, driving slowly and without headlights through the subdivision.

The highway north out of Ajo was empty and shining in the moonlight. Aside from his wallet and a suitcase of clothes, he'd taken only one other

thing—Rachael’s college sweatshirt.

They would not see their home again.

TEN

Two days later, Rachael awoke on a small, hard mattress. She sat up in a tiny room, barely the size of a walk-in closet, and illuminated by only a single bare lightbulb that swung from the ceiling.

Her head pounded and her mouth was dry, but she felt alert again.

The walls and the floor were covered in thick yellow foam. She saw five jugs of water in a corner, and beside them, a box filled with bags of potato chips, apples, candy bars, and packs of crackers. She heard a humming sound beyond the soundproofed walls.

She stood up, found it difficult to keep her balance, as if the floor were shifting beneath her. She looked at the foam walls again and thought, *I've been committed. I imagined the kidnapping. The crowbar through the window. I've gone mad.*

Rachael grabbed a jug of water and carried it back over to the mattress. She sat down and took a long drink, wondering if they were watching her right now.

But if I'm in the asylum, why am I still wearing this black suit?

There came a sudden blast that sounded vaguely like a foghorn. It blew once more, and as she considered it, there was something about the constant humming that unnerved her, and the way this place shifted beneath her. She looked up at the ceiling. No soundproofing foam there. Just shiny metal. And the dimensions of the room suddenly made perfect sense. So did the subtle rocking movement, the humming, the low drone, the horn. *This isn't a psych ward. I'm in the trailer of an eighteen-wheeler.*

She wept, and her body shook with tremors.

Ghosts Present

ELEVEN

The man who was now Joe Foster floored the old Chevy down the hill into town. It was mid-October, the Colorado sky blue-screen blue, fresh snow gleaming above twelve thousand feet in the La Platas, the aspen and cottonwoods turning gold across the foothills. Five miles west, the profile of Mesa Verde shimmered in the Friday-afternoon sunlight. He could see the glint of cars crawling south on the high road that snaked through the park.

He drove into the small town of Mancos, pulled his pickup over to the curb, and cut the engine. It was still a few minutes shy of 3:00 P.M. and so quiet inside the truck, he could hear the trees chattering around him. A gold aspen leaf fell on the windshield wiper, twitched for a moment until a breeze pushed it up the glass and airborne again.

She would have liked this little town, he thought.

He spotted his daughter moving with the throng of students down the stone steps of the K–12 school. She was walking with two friends, a backpack slung over her shoulder, caught up in some breathless adolescent debate. The group of girls stepped off the sidewalk into the grass and formed a tight circle. Making plans, he imagined. Promising to call one another. Propagating silly rumors.

He watched his daughter through the cracked windshield. He could have watched her all afternoon. The truth was, he'd never expected her to reach her sixteenth year. For a long time, he'd dedicated himself to preparing for the worst-possible outcome, including plans to end himself when she was gone. But then something had happened. Or actually, not happened. She *hadn't* died. She got sick several times a year. She'd been scary sick twice, but she always bounced back. The cocktail of meds and the chest physical therapy were working, and every day she was healthy felt like a sentence commuted, an execution stayed.

Now she was coming toward the truck, but as he slipped the key into the ignition, a woman intercepted his daughter on the sidewalk.

He sat up. His daughter had stopped, and she was talking to a tall woman in a navy skirt, white blouse, the matching jacket folded over her arm. His daughter shook her head. He couldn't hear what they were saying. He reached to open the door, but his daughter was on her own again, moving quickly toward the truck, the woman walking in the opposite direction. She pulled open the squeaky door and climbed inside.

"Hey, baby girl." She'd picked out a new name, but he rarely said it, called her "baby girl" or "sweetie," or nothing.

"Hey, Dad."

"Who was that woman you were just talking to?"

"She didn't say."

"What'd she want?"

"Asked me my name, if I lived around here."

He cranked the engine, the noisy truck now vibrating beneath them.

"Why'd she want to know that?"

"I don't know. I blew her off, told her I had to go. You think she's a cop?"

"I don't know."

"Can I drive home?"

"Not today, honey." He shifted into drive and pulled out into the street, cruising slowly past the school, looking for the woman who'd approached his daughter. "What color hair did she have?"

"Brown. She was pretty." The upperclassmen were flooding out of the building now. They were taller. It made it difficult to spot the woman. "What's wrong, Dad?"

She wasn't there. Just a bunch of kids.

"You know we have to be very careful," he said.

"Are we gonna leave again?"

"I don't know yet, sweetie. Not tonight at least." He spun the steering wheel, did a 180 in the street, and headed back up the hill, out of town, toward home.

TWELVE

The farmhouse stood in a grove of blue spruce, a mile and a half south of town. There was a little pasture out back, and the Mancos River formed the east border of the property. They could hear it from the house during spring runoff.

Now it was full-on dusk. Through the open windows, the night air swept in, carrying the scent of decaying leaves and sour apples and the odor of a dairy farm.

The girl got the pillows from the game closet while he queued up the DVD. They were near the end of *Vertigo.* Movies helped to make the therapy more bearable. They'd seen more than thirty Hitchcocks together this way. The man sat down behind his daughter and she leaned forward into a pillow and watched Jimmy Stewart kissing Kim Novak in the eerie green light of the hotel room.

With cupped hands, he began to pound on her back. After five minutes, he told her to cough. She switched positions, now lying on her side.

Not long after she was born, he and his wife had started calling her their "salty baby," since whenever they kissed her forehead, they'd taste salt. His wife happened to mention this to the pediatrician, and he promptly ordered a sweat test, which came back positive. They had no idea, but overly salty sweat is a major indicator of cystic fibrosis.

The girl was diagnosed when she was two years old, and every day for the last fourteen years, the man had given his daughter CPT, chest physical therapy. The therapy broke up mucus in her lungs, made it easier for her to breathe, helped to stave off infection. CPT had long since become just another part of the routine, like brushing their teeth.

When they were finished, the girl sat at the table in the kitchen, working through her geometry problems. The man went outside. The truck had been running loud and hot, and he figured an oil change was long overdue. He crawled under the truck and lay on his back, struggling to unscrew the oil cap. Sometimes a car would pass on the nearby country road, but otherwise, the silence remained undisturbed.

The night grew colder as the moon rose over the foothills. An occasional breeze stirred the firs. From the next farm down, he could hear cows groaning at the moon, their bells clanging.

He finally got the cap off, smelled the scorched oil as it drained into the pan.

Another car was coming, which made three in the last ten minutes. Busy night.

The car was slowing now. He heard it stop at the end of his driveway. A city car. A rental perhaps, not the big rumbling gas guzzlers most of his neighbors owned.

The tires began to turn. *What the hell?* He wriggled himself out from under the truck and came to his feet, stood there shielding his eyes from the headlights as the car rolled toward him down the gravel drive.

It stopped behind the Chevy. The engine quit. The headlights died. For a moment, he couldn't see a thing, temporarily blinded. A door opened. Slammed. Footsteps moved toward him. The man thinking, *Now you've fucked up. Should have left this afternoon. Packed a suitcase, gotten the hell out of here.* He backed away as his eyes readjusted to the darkness.

"You blinded me with your brights," he said, "so I can't see too well right now. Who's there?" The footsteps stopped. He could see the shape of his visitor now, light from the front porch falling across her face.

It was the woman who had approached his daughter after school.

"Sorry to blind you," she said. "I must have driven past your mailbox three times before I saw it."

"Who are you?"

She offered her hand. "Kalyn Sharp." She was his height, maybe a few years younger, with straight brown hair, pronounced cheekbones. He couldn't determine the color of her eyes in the poor light, and he didn't take her hand.

"What do you want?"

"Are you William Innis?"

Surging blast of adrenaline. "No."

"Well, I have a picture of Mr. Innis here in my purse. You could be twins."

"You need to leave." He turned away from the woman, started back toward the house.

“Mr. Innis!” she called after him. “Please!”

He went inside, let the screen door bang shut behind him.

“Who’s out there?” his daughter asked.

“Go finish your homework in your room.” She recognized something in her father’s voice—nonnegotiable fire. The girl gathered up her textbook and notebook and headed down the squeaky hardwood floor of the hallway.

The man stood at the kitchen sink, ran the tap, scrubbed the oil and grease from his hands with hot water and soap, trying to piece together exactly what he would do, what they would need to take, what they could leave. As he looked up to see if the car was backing down the driveway, there was a knock on the door.

He walked over, stared through the screen at the woman standing on his porch.

“Out here in the boondocks,” he said, “when someone tells you to get the hell off their property, it’s usually a wise thing to—” Now she was holding something up against the screen, and when he saw it, his stomach turned.

FBI credentials. A crippling weakness spread into his knees.

What are you willing to do to stay with your daughter?

“Relax,” she said. “If I were here to take you in, you’d already be in handcuffs.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I believe you’re innocent, Mr. Innis.” Her words stopped him cold.

“And why is that?”

“Because your wife . . . Rachael. She wasn’t the first. Or the last.”

THIRTEEN

As Will filled a pot with water from the tap, he glanced over his shoulder at the FBI agent seated at the kitchen table.

“How’d you find us?”

“Year and a half chasing down your aliases. What are you using now?”

“Joe Foster.” The pot was full. He set it on the stove, turned up the gas, took a seat at the kitchen table across from Kalyn. The woman had draped her coat over one of the chairs, laid her briefcase on the hardwood floor. “Which field office you out of?” Will asked.

“Phoenix. So, I’ve been dying to ask—why’d you run?”

“My daughter has cystic fibrosis. I had to assume her mother was dead, and this Ajo detective had a giant hard-on for me right out of the gate. I figured there was a decent chance I was going to be charged. I don’t know how familiar you are with CF, but it’s a terminal disease. Most people who have it never see their thirtieth birthday. I wasn’t taking a chance that my daughter would die without me there by her side.”

“But she’s okay now?”

“We’ve had three good years. That’s not to say she won’t get sick again.”

“How are you making a living?”

“Web design. I work out of my house.”

“Must be hard, knowing what everyone thinks of you. What they think you did.”

“Look, we have a new life now, and it’s pretty good. I know what happened the night my wife went missing. My conscience is clear.”

“You shouldn’t have run.”

“If you aren’t here to arrest me, what is it you want?”

Kalyn reached down and lifted her briefcase. She opened it, pulled out a manila folder. The first thing she handed Will was a map—New Mexico, Arizona, SoCal. Red *X*’s had been marked in four locations across the Southwest.

“What’s this?”

Kalyn scooted her chair beside his, laid down a photograph of a woman smiling, with ski slopes in the background. Reflective sunglasses. Enormous down jacket.

"Suzanne Tyrpak. Disappeared in July of 2000 between Gallup and Albuquerque." She dropped another photograph on the table. "Jill Dillon." She pointed to an *X* on the southern border of Arizona. "Disappeared in August 2001, outside of Nogales." Another photograph. Will's wife stared at him. Beautiful, devious Rachael smile. He remembered taking the picture on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. "Rachael Innis. Disappeared in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, July 2002. Here's the last one." She laid a photograph carefully beside Rachael's picture. "Lucy Dahl. Disappeared August 2004 on the interstate between El Paso and Tucson."

A strange silence settled in the house. Chimes clanging in discordance on the front porch. Will feeling like it wasn't just Kalyn and him in the kitchen. Ghosts present. He glanced down at the photographs, lined up side by side, and a chill pushed through him.

"Oh my God," he said.

"You noticed."

"These women could be sisters."

"I know. The dark eyes. Curly black hair."

"Is that a coincidence?"

"I don't know, but I'll show you what isn't." Kalyn took four more photographs from the folder, spread them out. A Lexus. Honda Civic. Ford Explorer. Rachael's Jeep Cherokee. In each photograph, the driver's side window was busted out. "You can't see it here, but the right front tire on all of these cars was punctured."

"So this is like a, um—"

"An MO. Yes."

"Were any of these women ever found?"

Kalyn shook her head. "Your water's boiling."

Will got up from the table and took two mugs from the cabinet.

"I have peppermint, green tea, and Earl Grey."

"Peppermint, please." Will dropped the tea bags into the mugs, and as he poured the boiling water slowly over them, Kalyn said, "I think I know who took these women."

Will set the pot of water back on the stove, turned off the gas, his hands trembling now.

He stared at the floor and took deep breaths. “You think? Or you know?”

“I’m about eighty percent sure. Let me ask you something. You were a defense attorney. You somewhat familiar with how the cartels operate?”

“Sure.”

“Ever heard of the Alphas?”

Will carried the cups of tea over to the table and sat down. “No, what’s that?”

“There used to be an antidrug paratroop and intelligence battalion called the Special Air Mobile Force Group. These were Mexican soldiers, but they were trained at the School of the Americas. In 1991, a large contingent of this elite military force deserted and went into business with the drug traffickers. I guess the profit margins were too lucrative. Today, they’re known as the Alphas, a gang of high-paid mercenaries, primarily tasked with protecting loads of cocaine, heroin, and marijuana smuggled into America by the Gulf Cartel. No one knows how many there are, but estimates run from one hundred to two hundred members. They’re superbly trained, and they operate more like commandos than your run-of-the-mill cartel thugs. They’re fiercely loyal. Their handiwork is obvious. State-of-the-art weapons. Military-style cover and concealment tactics. And they’re brutal. Currently offering fifty-thousand-dollar bounties for the assassination of U.S. law-enforcement officers.

“Now I have contacts and informants in every border town in the Southwest, and I’ve learned that a handful of the Alphas dabble in human trafficking. Let me tell you, information about them is damn near impossible to come by. My informant in Nogales wouldn’t even say this one guy’s name out loud. He insisted on writing it on a piece of paper. And he wouldn’t have done that, but he’s a tweaker. I bought this name for two grand.”

“What name?”

“Javier Estrada. You know it?” Will shook his head. “You sure? You never represented this guy or—”

“No. You have a photo?”

She shook her head.

“And what makes you think these Alphas are involved?”

“Couple of things.” Kalyn sipped her tea. “First off, there was something about the crime scenes that always bothered me. No blood, and aside from the bashed windows, no sign of rape or violence. And it seemed to have been done very professionally. Plus, the bodies never turned up. That always bugged me. If these women were just killed and dumped, wouldn’t you think that at least one body might have surfaced by now? Serial killers tend to want their victims discovered, but these women literally vanished.”

Will leaned back in his chair, blew ripples across the surface of his green tea.

“What makes you so certain it’s this guy? Javier.” He didn’t like the way the name felt as it rolled off his tongue.

“My informant used to be a mule for the Gulf Cartel. He worked with Mr. Estrada on several assignments. Said that once, over a bottle of mescal, Javier told him about snatching a woman on I-40, between Gallup and Albuquerque.”

“Suzanne Tyrpak.”

“Yeah.”

“So why hasn’t he been arrested?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than it sounds.”

Will sipped his tea. “You need something from me,” he said.

Kalyn nodded. “You’ve said you don’t recognize his name, and I believe you. But maybe if you saw him, something would click. I need you to come to Phoenix with me and ID him when we pick him up.”

“What about the outstanding charges against me?” Will asked.

“I’m working on it. Officially, we aren’t having this discussion, and I never came here.”

“Why is that?”

“Not everyone in the Phoenix Field Office is so gung ho to devote money and manpower to these murders. There’s more pressing business, and since this isn’t directly drug-related, it’s a second-tier priority.”

“Have you contacted the other women’s families?”

“Tyrpak’s husband killed himself three years ago. Dillon’s husband won’t talk to me. He’s got a new wife, new baby, wants nothing to do with the past.”

“I can understand that.”

Kalyn gathered up the photographs and the map and shoved them into the manila folder, dropped it all in her briefcase. She stood up.

“So when would this happen?” Will asked.

“I was kind of hoping we could go in the morning.”

“Tomorrow? That’s sooner than—”

“You’re still a fugitive. What’s to say you won’t disappear tonight when I leave?”

“I thought you believed me.”

“I do. Not sure I’m ready to put my career on the line for it, though. Besides, would you rather sit around waiting, anticipating?”

“I’d have to bring my daughter.”

“Fine.”

“That truck out there is all I’ve got, and it won’t make the trip to Phoenix and back.”

“You can ride down with me. I’m staying at the Mesa Verde Inn. I’ll come by at seven to pick you up.”

Will stood. “We’ll be here.”

Kalyn lifted her briefcase, reached out, and this time, Will took her hand.

“You’re still tortured,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Comb the Internet for news items about her every day, don’t you? Anonymous calls to police stations across the Southwest to see if any bodies have turned up?”

“I just need to know what happened to her, and how it happened. It kills me not knowing where her body is. It’s stupid, I know. It shouldn’t matter, but it does. You know what I mean?”

Something in Kalyn’s eyes told him that she did.

“It was good to meet you, William Innis.”

“Will.”

He walked her out to the car.

When she was gone, he stood in the driveway in the dark, breathing in the cold chill of the autumn night.

Then he crawled under the truck to finish changing the oil.

FOURTEEN

Will knocked on the door.

His daughter yelled, "*What?*" and he walked in, saw her sprawled on her back on the bed, staring at him upside down, the cordless phone held to her chest. "What?" she whispered.

"I need to talk to you. Now."

"About that woman?" she mouthed.

He nodded.

She brought the phone back to her ear, said, "Christie, I gotta go. Okay. Okay. You tell me what he says. Bye, sweetie."

Will pulled the chair out from the desk and sat down.

"Who was that woman?" she asked.

"Her name's Kalyn Sharp, and she's an FBI agent."

His daughter sat up quickly. "Are they taking you, Dad?"

"No, honey, no. She believes me."

"It's about Mom."

"She thinks she knows who killed her."

She took a sharp intake of breath. "Who?"

"This man . . . look, that's not important. She thinks maybe I've seen him before, back when we lived in Ajo. She wants me to try to ID him. So we're all going down to Phoenix first thing in the morning. We'll ride with Ms. Sharp. Honey, it's okay."

His daughter turned over and wept into her pillow. Will climbed in bed with her. He pulled her into his lap, ran his fingers through her hair.

After awhile, she rolled over and wiped her eyes, her face red, tear-streaked.

"This FBI woman really believes you didn't hurt Mom?"

"Yeah," Will said. "She knows I didn't."

She sniffled, wiped her nose.

"I want to ask you something," Will said, "and you can tell me the honest truth. I won't be mad, no matter what you say."

"What?"

“Did you . . . do you ever wonder if I had something to do with what happened to Mom?”

His daughter stared at the poster on the ceiling, at the two lava lamps glowing on her desk, at the piles of clothing scattered across the floor. She pried off the black curls that had stuck to the tears on her face and finally looked her father in the eye.

“It would be a lie if I said I never wondered.”

He nodded, shoved back the emotion those words had detonated inside of him. What hurt him more than anything was the fear he knew his daughter must have lived with, wondering if he was this monster, responsible for her mother’s death.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I understand.”

“I only mean that *sometimes* I wonder. Not that I think you did it. And I haven’t wondered in a long time.”

“Baby girl,” he said, “look in my eyes.” They’d sheeted over with tears. “I’m not sure if I ever said this to you, but I’m going to say it now. I did not kill your mother. My wife.”

“I know, Dad.”

“I loved her. And if I thought for a second there was anything I could do to get her back, I would.”

“I believe you.”

They embraced. As they pulled away, she said, “Is there a chance Mom’s still alive?”

“I don’t think so, sweetheart.”

“But anything’s possible, right?”

“It’s been five years. I don’t want you walking around with your hopes up, okay?”

The phone rang. She grabbed it, glanced at the caller ID. “I have to take this, Dad.”

Will chuckled at that. “I love you, Devlin,” he said.

“Dad,” she whispered, “you just said my old name.”

“I know. It’s okay now.” Will got up and walked out of the room, shut the door softly behind him as Devlin said, “Hey, Lisa, what up, girl?”

He walked through the old farmhouse, closing windows. There would be a heavy frost in the morning.

Just the possibility of closure, of returning to some semblance of his old life, thrilled him. He hadn't seen his parents, his sister, or any of his friends since he and Devlin had fled Arizona, and the pain their disappearance must have caused was always with him. Every day, he'd check friends' blogs, Facebook and MySpace pages, Google his and Devlin's name to see if people still searched for them. If they were still mentioned. Still thought of. Still remembered and missed.

And he desperately missed his work, his real work—practicing law. He missed being in a courtroom, missed picking a jury during voir dire and the nerves of verdict day.

Though he knew it wouldn't return Rachael to him, he still wanted all the vestiges of his old life back. Perhaps going down to Phoenix with Kalyn would be a step in that direction.

He sat at the kitchen table, sipping his cold green tea, couldn't stop thinking, *Tomorrow, you face the man who killed Rachael.* He was nervous, but more than anything, just anxious to put it all behind him. Figured he and Devlin were due a little peace.

Jav

FIFTEEN

At 2:30 P.M., after a seven-hour drive down from the high country of southwest Colorado, Kalyn pulled her Buick Regal beside an overflowing Dumpster and turned off the engine. They all stepped out into the potent October heat, crossed the parking lot, and stopped at the cluster of mailboxes so Kalyn could collect her mail.

Four cinder-block buildings boxed in the dirt courtyard where Devlin stood, each containing eight apartments, four on top, four below.

A rusted swing set had collapsed nearby. One roller skate and a deflated soccer ball sat in a sandless sandbox. Between the constant drone of air conditioners and the roar of the nearby interstate, peace and quiet did not appear to thrive here.

They approached the north building and entered the stairwell.

A jet airliner thundered overhead on its descent toward Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

Their footfalls clanged up fourteen metal steps and they emerged onto the open second-floor walkway, where Kalyn stopped at the third door. Apparently, the brass lettering had fallen off or been stolen, because the number 22 was scrawled above the peephole in red Magic Marker.

She unlocked the dead bolt and led them in. Even from the foyer, Devlin could tell it wasn't much of a home. Small living room. Smaller kitchen. White walls in desperate need of several coats of paint. Cramped hallway leading back to the single bedroom.

It must have been over ninety degrees inside.

"Sorry about the heat," she said. "My AC went out two weeks ago, and I just haven't been around to replace it." Sheaves of paper had been spread across the coffee table, the sofa, in numerous piles on the floor. Devlin counted three bulletin boards in the living room alone. One had been covered with what appeared to be crime-scene photos. Another displayed the organization of the Gulf Cartel, with maps of various corridors of the United States, certain highways and interstates highlighted.

"I apologize for the mess. As you can see, I'm a bit of a workaholic."

Devlin was already sweating. Kalyn grabbed three diet Cokes from the fridge, and they sat on the sofa, fanning themselves with sheets of paper, sipping the cold soft drinks.

"So here's the plan," Kalyn said. "We leave Devlin here, and Will, you and I drive over to Mr. Estrada's residence, see if you can't make that identification."

"I thought I was just going down to look at a lineup. That's what you—"

"No, you're going to do what we call a ride-along. Don't worry. You'll be up front with me. It'll be fine."

"But I thought you already—"

"Look, we can't pick him up unless you ID him."

Devlin looked at her father.

"Will my daughter be safe here?" he asked.

"She'll be fine. She can watch TV. I don't have cable, but you can get the network stations."

The last thing Devlin wanted to do was sit in this hot, disgusting apartment all afternoon.

"I want to go with you," she said.

"You heard Miss Sharp."

"Dad!"

Her father stood up, said, "Come with me, Dev." He glanced at Kalyn. "I need to talk to her for a minute in private."

Devlin followed Will outside and shut the door. They stood by the railing overlooking the downtrodden courtyard.

"Listen to me," he whispered. "I know you don't want to stay here, and I don't blame you. The thing is, I'm not exactly sure what's going on yet. This just feels off, but she has us in a bind. If you get scared, if anything happens while we're gone, you call me on your cell. I'll come back here and get you."

"I just wanna go home. I'm missing a sleepover at Lisa's tonight."

"I know, baby. I'm gonna take care of this, and then we're out of here. We'll fly back to Colorado if we have to."

"You promise?"

"I promise. You're earning major points today."

"You'll take me shopping in Durango?"

"Yes."

“On a spree?”
“Okay.”
“Three hundred dollars.”
“Two fifty.”
Devlin smiled, said, “All right. I’m not gonna let you forget.”

SIXTEEN

Fifteen minutes from her apartment, Kalyn turned into the driveway of a five-story office building and pulled into a parking space near the entrance.

“He’s here?” Will asked.

“No, this is the Phoenix Field Office. I just have to run in and grab something.”

Kalyn left the Buick running and hustled into the building.

She returned five minutes later, hopped in the car, sped out into traffic.

The road into Scottsdale was lined with palm trees.

“So how’s this going to work, exactly?” Will asked.

“I have to be honest,” she said. “I’m not wild about doing it this way.”

Will laughed nervously. “Makes two of us.”

“First, we have to see if he’s home. If he is, I’ll arrest him, bring him out to the car. You can give me a thumbs-up, thumbs-down on whether or not you recognize him.”

“What if I don’t?”

“This is the guy,” she said.

“But what if I can’t—”

“Can I trust you with something?”

“I guess.” They were passing strip malls at the rate of ten per mile.

“Here’s the dilemma. Mr. Estrada is wanted for a whole host of things, many of them much easier to prove than human trafficking. You ID him early on, we can go that route. Maybe we get some answers. If you don’t, well, somebody else gets a crack at him. Border Patrol. Phoenix PD. DEA. Mexican authorities. And then we can forget about ever getting him prosecuted for what he did to your wife, or finding out what happened to her. I really don’t like where that leaves you in terms of the pending charges.”

“Is this how it’s normally done?”

“No.”

“Is it legal?”

Kalyn glanced at him. “Something you should know about FBI agents.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re always by the book.”

They were driving through residential neighborhoods now, the houses on steroids, lavish and ridiculous.

“How’d you become an agent?” Will asked.

“I was a cop right out of college. Did that for four years, went to law school. Then the Academy. Typical route.”

“Did you always know—”

“Look, I can’t do the ‘Is this what you always wanted to be when you grew up?’ conversation right now. I’m trying to get my head straight for this takedown.”

They rode in silence for another few miles, and then Kalyn turned into a gated community. At the guard station, she flashed her badge and creds. The gates opened, and they drove into one of the swankiest neighborhoods Will had ever seen, six- and seven-thousand-square-foot homes being the runts of the bunch, private security gates, driveways that looked like Jaguar and Porsche dealerships.

They followed Superstition View Boulevard up the lower flanks of a brown mountain turreted with rock outcroppings and desert flora. The properties were exquisitely and exotically landscaped. Hundreds of species of cacti. Yuccas. Rocks in place of grass.

A mile past the guard station, Kalyn pulled over to the curb.

“This it?” Will asked.

“Next house on the right. You got your cell with you?”

“Yeah.”

Kalyn took hers out of her purse. “Give me the number.” She programmed Will’s number into her phone, then turned off the engine and opened the door.

“Wait. I thought—”

She tossed him the keys, said, “Leave your cell on and hop in the driver’s seat.”

“No, I want to know exactly how this is—” She shut the door and walked quickly up the road, disappearing behind a row of hedges. He scooted over behind the wheel. With the AC off, the heat soon became unbearable.

Will was sweating again. This felt all wrong.

He turned, looked through the back window. The road had risen several hundred feet above the city of Scottsdale. He had a commanding view.

Thirty miles to the east, mountains soared over the desert, looming mythically in the afternoon sunlight.

He thought about Devlin, hoped she'd found something to do to pass the time.

His cell rang. Kalyn calling. "Hey," he said.

"Bring the car into the driveway now." There was noise in the background.

"Did you—" She hung up. Will shoved the keys into the ignition and cranked the engine. He gave the Buick a little gas, edged toward the driveway, readying himself to see the man who'd taken Rachael. Surprisingly, he wasn't angry, just nervous and scared, wanting to get this over with, get back to Colorado with Devlin.

When he turned into the driveway, he caught an eyeful of the sprawling multi-level residence, lots of steel, glass, and adobe, like something that belonged in a textbook on modern architecture. A virtual forest of saguaros and organ pipe in the front yard. Two cars in the driveway—a black Land Rover and a silver Lotus.

He pulled up behind the sports car, palms sweating on the steering wheel. *Where are you, Kalyn?* Every passing second, this whole thing was feeling worse and worse.

The front door finally swung open. He exhaled, dizzy. *Here we go.* But a boy walked out. He had dark hair and eyes, light brown skin. Next came a thin blonde wearing hot pants and a purple halter top, red-faced, barefoot, her hands cuffed behind her back.

They walked down the steps and onto the sidewalk, Kalyn following, a gun in her hand. *What the fuck?* Will watched as they all approached the car. Kalyn opened the door behind the driver's seat and the boy and the woman got in, the woman crying, the boy silent, stoic.

Kalyn climbed into the front passenger seat and slammed the door.

"You got no right!" the woman said.

Kalyn got onto her knees and faced the backseat. She looked at the boy. "What's your name?" she asked. He glanced at his mother. "Don't look at her. I asked you—"

“Don’t you fucking think about talking to my son like that, you piece of —”

“Raphael,” he said, his voice still prepubescent.

“How old are you?”

“Eleven.”

“Raphael, I want you to do me a favor and buckle your mother’s seat belt for me.” He leaned over, fastened it. “Now buckle yourself in.” When he’d done that, Kalyn leaned down and snapped a second set of handcuffs around the boy’s slender ankles. “That too tight?” He shook his head. “Start driving,” she said to Will.

“They under arrest?”

“What does it look like?”

“This isn’t how you said it’d go.”

“Roll with it.”

“I don’t feel comfortable—”

“Drive, Will!” He shifted into reverse, backed down the driveway.

“You’re dead,” the woman said. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Will could see her eyes narrowed and raging, eyeliner running down her cheeks. “Jav will take you apart. You have no idea what you just did. You just killed yourself, your family, friends, anyone who ever knew you.”

“Where is he, Misty?” Kalyn asked.

Misty spit in her face.

Will turned onto the main road and headed downhill toward the guard station.

“Where’s your father today, Raphael?” Kalyn asked, wiping her face. “At the Boulders?”

He said nothing.

Will didn’t see it happen, but he heard the bone crunch.

“Fuck!” Misty was wailing, and looking in the rearview mirror again, he saw blood pouring out of her nose. Raphael was crying, too, Will swerving.

“You can’t do that! I have rights, you bitch!”

“I know the wife of Javier Estrada better not say one word to me about rights. Now I’m gonna crack your son’s head right the fuck open in front of you if you don’t tell me where your husband is.”

“Kalyn, what are—”

“You can’t do that!” Misty screamed.

Kalyn raised the Glock.

“The Boulders.”

Oh my God, Will thought. *Oh my God.* They were nearing the guard station and the front entrance. Kalyn turned around and sat down in her seat.

“By the book?” Will said under his breath. “Was that by the book just now?”

The gates parted. They passed through. Will punched the gas, boiling inside, and he hadn’t gone half a mile before he stomped on the brake and pulled over to the curb. He turned off the engine, opened his door, and jumped out into the brutal heat.

Kalyn got out, too, slammed her door. They met at the front bumper.

“Let me see your badge right—”

“Just listen.”

“You broke that woman’s nose, threatened to hurt her son. Let me see your—”

“I used to be an agent.”

“*Used* to?”

“Listen to me, Will. Please.”

He glanced back into the car. “I’m out of here,” he said. “I’m done with this.”

She grabbed his arm. “I was an agent up until a year ago. They wouldn’t let me open this case. I investigated anyway. Used Bureau resources.”

“They fired you.”

“No one was doing shit to find out what happened to these women.”

“They fired you.”

“Yeah.”

“Well that’s . . . that’s just great. You’ve manipulated me into this.”

“I can’t get Javier on my own. I need you.”

“So does my daughter.”

“I know you’re scared,” she said. “I understand that. But we are *this* close to finding the man who took your wife. *This* close.”

“She’s gone. Dead. I have a daughter to raise. He isn’t worth prison.”

“Is your wife?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What if she’s alive, Will?”

“She isn’t. It’s been five—”

“But what if she is? Isn’t that possibility worth this? Look, I lied about Javier. Nobody has anything on him. Just me. And today is our chance to talk to him.”

“You threw away your career for these women? That makes no—”

“You remember the pictures I showed you last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Lucy Dahl? Remember her?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Her maiden name was Sharp. She was my younger sister. Putting it together yet? Now, Javier is the man who took your wife. My sister. Wouldn’t you like to know where they are? Wouldn’t you like to ask him a question or two?”

“Yes, but—”

“Well, no one else is gonna get that information for you, and this is the price. This is what it costs. So man up.”

“I’ve never done anything like this, and I can’t risk prison.”

“Well, unless you figure this out, you’re already going away for your wife’s murder.”

“What’s that? Blackmail?”

“I’d hate to, that’s the truth, but I’ll turn you in, Will. Maybe I get back in with the Bureau. Maybe I get some interest in my sister’s case. Don’t think for a second I won’t if you jeopardize my getting my hands on Javier.” Will stared at a passing car, the air above the pavement rippling with heat. “I have you by the balls, Will. You got no other play.”

“We talk to him,” Will said. “That’s it. We only talk.”

SEVENTEEN

Five minutes later, Will pulled the Buick into the parking lot of an abandoned mall that appeared to have been gutted by fire in the recent past. It was 4:00 P.M., the light beginning to lengthen. Kalyn helped Misty and Raphael out of the backseat, removed the handcuffs from the boy's ankles, and led them at gunpoint through one of the shattered front windows of a Belk Store, Will following close behind.

It was dark inside, and smelled like a fireplace. Kalyn had brought a flashlight, and she swept the beam through the store as they followed one of the aisles past the footwear section, the south wall scorched black, the odor of melted plastic and glass and linoleum growing stronger. Clothing racks still populated the store, most laden with singed, molding clothes. Will didn't know if it was the stench of the place or the fear of the situation, but he felt sick to his stomach.

"What are we doing here?" Misty asked. Her question went unanswered. "My nose is burning."

In the far corner of the store, they came to the children's department.

"Head back toward the dressing rooms," Kalyn said.

Misty was crying again. They arrived at the door to the last dressing room, which Kalyn pushed open. On the floor lay two sleeping bags, a stack of paperback books, four flashlights, two cases of bottled water, and a canvas bag brimming with nonperishable food.

"What's this?" Misty asked.

"Sit down, both of you." Kalyn uncuffed Raphael and Misty, then recuffed their hands to two of the metal legs of a bench that was bolted to the floor. She put the water and the food and the flashlights within reach.

"You're gonna leave us here?" Misty asked.

"Think how terrified the women your husband kidnapped must have been."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Right. Am I going to find him at the Boulders?"

"Yeah."

“You do not want to lie to me.”

“I’m not.”

“If you’ve told me the truth, the police will come get you tonight. If you haven’t, I will, and God help you.” She looked at Raphael. “Nothing’s going to happen to you, okay? I need you to be brave for me for a little while longer.”

As Kalyn and Will walked out of the dressing room, Misty screamed after them, her voice filling the dark, empty store.

EIGHTEEN

Now Kalyn drove, speeding north up Scottsdale Road.

Will stared out the window, and despite the fear, he had to acknowledge that there was a part of him that wanted very much to be here, to see Javier Estrada.

He pulled out his cell.

“What are you doing?” Kalyn asked.

“Calling my daughter.”

Devlin answered on the first ring, “Hey, Dad.”

The sound of her voice crushed him. “What are you doing, baby girl?”

“Watching a cooking show on PBS.”

“How is it?”

“Awesometastic,” she replied, echoing her mother’s sassy spunk. “You almost done? Kalyn’s channels suck even worse than ours.”

“Not yet.”

She paused, said, “Did you see him?”

“I can’t talk right now, honey. I’ll tell you about it later. Just wanted to check in.”

He closed the cell.

North of Scottsdale, they passed through the gates of the Boulders, thirty-six holes of legendary golf links, sculpted into desert foothills.

“You play?” Kalyn asked as they approached the clubhouse.

“Used to.”

“So how do we find this guy if he’s somewhere out there?”

“This is a very nice course. I’m sure he needed reservations, so the pro shop would be the place to start.”

Kalyn pulled into a parking spot and they walked together into the pro shop. The man behind the counter was forty-something and tanned to golden perfection, his brown hair gilded by sunlight. Will could also see

that he was brimming with attitude, that rare, sophisticated superiority effused by those with just enough talent to be the local pro but who lack some crucial ingredient to win their PGA card. His name tag read Dan.

“Help you with something?” he said. Kalyn reached into her purse, took out her expired FBI ID, let it flip open, carefully watching Dan’s eyes. They weren’t really reading it, just registering the shock of seeing FBI in bold blue letters.

Kalyn snapped it closed. “I wonder if you could help us, Dan. We’re trying to locate a gentleman named Javier Estrada. I believe he may be playing here right now.”

The club pro stepped behind a computer, began typing.

“You don’t need a warrant or anything for this?” he asked.

Busted, Will thought. *You better handle this with grace, Kalyn.*

“No, sir,” she said. “Now if I wanted to know how many times he’d played in the last month, or access to his locker, that would require a warrant.”

“What’s this all about?” He was still typing.

“I’m sorry, I can’t go into that. Do you know Mr. Estrada?”

“I’ve given him several lessons in the last month. He tips very well.”

“Look at me, sir.” Dan looked up. “I’m not going to tell Mr. Estrada whatever information you give me, and you’d be wise not to discuss this with him. He’s a dangerous man.” Dan’s eyes cut back to the computer screen.

“He had a one-thirty tee time on the north course,” he said.

“Can you tell exactly which hole he’s on right now?”

The door to the pro shop swung open.

“No, but he should be getting—” Dan glanced up, his tan paling. He caught himself, smiled broadly, now looking past Kalyn and Will. “Javier!” he said. “How’d we do today?”

“Seventy-seven.”

Will heard pride and a faint accent in the man’s even voice. Javier Estrada walked up and stood beside Kalyn, decked out in knickers, Payne Stewart–style, the sides of his white-collared shirt darkened with sweat stains. He was fanning himself with a golf cap.

Will wandered away from the counter and Kalyn discreetly followed, hanging on to his arm as if they were just perusing the clubs and golf bags.

“Seventy-seven?” Dan said. “No. I don’t think I believe that.”

“That thing you showed me? The wrist turn thing? You are a beautiful genius.”

“Well, I’m happy for you, Jav. That’s good stuff. Good stuff.”

“I’d have shot seventy-five except for that par five on the back.”

“Fifteen?”

“I four-putted. That green was much slower than the others.”

“You know,” Dan said, leaning forward confidentially, “yours isn’t the first complaint I’ve heard about that green today. Between you and me, one of the groundskeepers overwatered it.”

“Who? Which groundskeeper?”

“Brian.”

“Brian cost me my personal best.”

“We still on for a lesson Monday afternoon?”

“Absolutely. Give me a bucket of balls. I need to straighten out something on my sand wedge before I head home.”

Kalyn pulled her Buick around to the side of the clubhouse so that they had a view of the driving range. The sun was setting, turning the rock formations pink, the fairways gold.

“I have to admit,” Will said, “seeing him here, dressed up like a golfing dandy—it kind of undercuts the badass, Alpha mystique.”

“Your cell on?” Kalyn asked.

“Yeah.”

“Program my number.” She gave it to him. “The moment he starts packing up to leave, call me.” She grabbed her purse, opened the door.

“Where are you going?” She got out, left Will sitting in the hot silence, fifty feet back from the range.

With his smooth, fluid swing, Javier was putting most of his balls on the nearest green. After awhile, he took out his driver, set up a tee. He settled into his stance, stood there shifting his hips, staring down at the ball, nodding his head. He did this for fifteen seconds, then brought the club back and swung. Will heard the impact of the huge titanium club face

meeting the ball. Javier followed through, froze, then looked up, watching as the ball arced toward the back of the range.

Sitting there, watching this kidnapping, drug-running murderer, Will felt surprisingly calm. *It's because you don't really think you'll go through with what you're about to do.* Javier drove the last ball and slid his driver into the golf bag.

Will opened his cell, called Kalyn. "He's hoisting his bag onto his shoulder right now."

"Wait there. I'm coming back to you."

Will closed the cell, Javier walking toward him now. Will could hear the crunch of his golf spikes on the pavement. Javier passed by his window. Smell of cologne and sweat. He wore RayBan sunglasses, and Will didn't like not knowing where the man was looking. Glancing in the side mirror, he watched until Javier disappeared around the clubhouse. Then he stared through the windshield, but he couldn't concentrate, kept watching the side mirror.

Calm down. Calm down. Calm—

Someone knocked on the driver's side window. He flinched. It was Kalyn. Will unlocked the door and she opened it and climbed in behind the wheel.

"What'd you do?" he asked.

She cranked the engine, shifted into reverse. "You'll see."

NINETEEN

The new Escalade slowed as it neared the entrance to the Boulders, right turn signal blinking.

“What’d you do?” Will asked again.

Kalyn cut her eyes at him, grinned wickedly. The Escalade pulled out onto N. Tom Darlington Road. They followed.

“Do me a favor,” Kalyn said. “Reach in my purse and pull out the Glock. You’ve held a gun before, right?”

“Yeah, at Webelos camp about twenty years ago.” Will lifted out a small black semiautomatic handgun. “Loaded?” he asked.

“Yep. Now very gently, pull back on the slide. You see a round?”

He saw the copper-tipped brass casing. “Yeah.”

“You can put it back.” Will looked up through the windshield, saw Javier’s SUV fifty yards ahead, but something was clearly wrong with it, the Escalade drifting toward the shoulder.

“Why’s he swerving?”

Kalyn smiled again.

“Oh God,” he said. “You didn’t.”

After another half mile, Javier pulled over onto the shoulder. The way it dipped forward and to the right, Will could tell the vehicle’s right front tire was flat. Kalyn slowed down, and twenty yards past the front bumper of the Escalade, she veered over onto the shoulder.

She turned off the engine, said, “You ready for this?”

“No.”

“Listen. You just do exactly what I say, and it’ll be fine.” Will looked in the side mirror, saw Javier’s door swing open. “When we come back,” Kalyn said, “I want you to drive. Javier’s gonna be beside you. I’m gonna be in back with the gun.” Kalyn reached into her purse and pulled out the Glock. Will saw Javier squatting down by the deflated tire, sunglasses in one hand, running the palm of his other across the rubber tread.

Kalyn holstered the Glock in a shoulder rig, which was concealed by her jacket.

“There’s no turning back once he’s in the car, Will. You understand that, right?”

Will took a breath, opened the door, and stepped outside.

Traffic was light, and with this stretch of road still five miles outside of Scottsdale, the landscape was predominantly sunlit desert as far as Will could see. He steadied his hands as they approached the Escalade, trying to process everything that had happened in the last two hours, marveling at how fast it had come to this.

Kalyn ran her tongue against the roof of her mouth, moistening it so she could speak. He had to buy it, or they could forget the whole thing. She rubbed her hands against her wool skirt.

Javier looked up when they were fifteen feet away, and Will watched Kalyn work up a big smile. She was originally from Texas, and she conjured up the accent she’d fought so hard to shed.

“Got yourself a flat tire there?”

Javier nodded, and Will tried to read him, but he wasn’t smiling or scowling, just receiving information. He wondered if he had a gun on him, would have staked the savings he didn’t have that the man had something lethal in the Escalade, probably under the seat or the dash. Javier let loose a lukewarm smile, not a shred of warmth to it. Will was praying Kalyn’s accent was so appalling, she’d offended whatever sensibilities he had, thereby distracting him.

“Did you run over something sharp?” Kalyn asked. “You got a spare?”

He sighed. “Yes. I have a spare.” He was still staring at her, his eyes processing her face. “Could you tell me something?” he asked.

“What’s that?”

“I’m certain I’ve seen you today. Could you tell me where?”

“I never seen you before in my life. I was just stopping to help a—”

“Ah, yes. The pro shop. You were speaking with Dan when I came in from my round.” At light speed, Javier’s eyes cut to Will, then back to Kalyn’s face. “This is the gentleman you were with?”

Will estimated that they were seven feet apart, wondered how fast Javier could move. *Blink of an eye. Draw, Kalyn.*

Javier said, “Your palms are sweating.”

Draw.

“Your hand is anxious to reach for the gun under your jacket. My concern, being that I don’t know you, is that you would try to do it quickly and accidentally shoot me before I’ve given you actual cause. So let’s circumvent that possible outcome. Take two steps back. Then slowly draw your weapon. Here are my hands. I’m unarmed. I will not move.”

She stepped back, reached into her jacket, drew the Glock, holding it low as she moved around behind him. “Get on your knees,” she said. He did. “Now put your hands behind your head and interlace your fingers.” Will was feeling confident in Kalyn’s ability to control the situation now, the Escalade keeping them shielded from the view of passing cars. From an inner pocket of her jacket, she took a pair of handcuffs and snapped them over Javier’s right wrist. “Lie flat on your stomach, with your hands behind your back.”

Javier made no argument, carefully prostrating himself on the pavement.

She locked the cuff around his other wrist.

“Get up on your feet slowly.” He rolled over onto his back, sat up, then stood up. “Approach your car, lean against it, and spread your legs.” She frisked him, found nothing but his wallet and a BlackBerry in the knickers pockets. “Now walk to *my* car.”

TWENTY

The passenger door opened. Javier Estrada ducked his head and climbed into the front seat.

"Buckle his seat belt," Kalyn said. Will hesitated. "He's cuffed; he isn't carrying any weapons. It's fine." Will felt Javier's eyes taking inventory of his face as he leaned over and pulled the seat belt across the man's chest and locked it into place. Kalyn shut the door, opened the one behind it, and climbed into the back. "Javier," she said, "just so we're clear, you have a Glock pointed at your spine through the seat. Drive, Will. Don't speed, don't run stop signs, and for God's sake don't get us into a wreck."

It was the weirdest silence Will had been a party to—no radio or talking, just three strangers in a car, driving through Scottsdale, Arizona. Javier stared straight ahead. Will watched him out of the corner of his eye at the stoplights, the man at ease, collected.

As they neared the interstate, Kalyn said, "Take Highway Sixty east."

Javier spoke for the first time since getting into the car, "Ah, the Superstitions. Am I right?" No one answered. "I've done business out there. That was an excellent takedown, by the way. Creative. Outside of the box. And the accent. Beautiful. You realize my mistake. I very nearly averted this entire situation. I keep a forty-five Smith & Wesson under my seat, and I actually started to reach for it before getting out of the car. Out of habit, you see. But I didn't. Had I"—he caught Kalyn's eyes in the rearview mirror—"you would be dead." He looked at Will. "And so would you."

They sped east, the sun sinking fast into the horizon, molten in the mirrors, on the glass and chrome of passing cars, the mountains in the distance getting bigger, vivid and deeply textured in the fading light.

"I have a question for you," Kalyn said. "Did that situation back there ring any bells?"

"I don't understand."

“Well, I almost brought along a bat, or a crowbar . . . something to bust out your driver’s side window. Maybe, if I’d done that, you would have realized what was happening.”

Javier shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t see your point.”

“No worries. You will.”

The sun was just a flaming sliver in the west as Will drove past the ranger station into Lost Dutchman State Park.

Kalyn told him to park at the first picnic area.

It was late. Only two other cars. Both empty. No hikers in sight. Beyond lay miles of darkening desert and, farther back, the Superstitions, the summits catching light, the bases cloaked in mist.

Will turned off the engine.

Total silence, save for the wind. The car rocked imperceptibly.

“So,” Kalyn said, “have you figured it out yet?”

Javier smiled. “Do not flatter yourself to think you are the only ones who would like to be in this position with me. I have plenty of enemies. But friends also. And it is my friends, my brothers, the threat of them, that make my enemies wise to keep a respectful distance. In short, I am not fucked with. This is unheard of. You are not law enforcement,” Javier said, “though perhaps once you were. Will here is shitting himself. You’re trying, so far, to be impersonal, but I sense the rage in you. At me. I don’t know why. You will tell me?”

Kalyn reached into the front seat and dropped four photos in Javier’s lap.

“Line them up, Will, so he can see.”

Will arranged the photographs, two on each leg. Suzanne Tyrpak. Jill Dillon. Rachael Innis. Lucy Dahl. Javier looked down at them. Looked up. Shrugged. Kalyn pulled out her cell, flipped it open. Will saw her pressing buttons. She handed the cell to him, said, “Show him.” On the miniature screen was a digital picture of Misty and Raphael in the back of the Buick. Will hesitated. “Show him.” He held the cell to Javier’s face. Javier registered the image, then looked out the side window toward a distant forest of saguaros.

“You two,” Javier said, his voice low, deliberately measured, “may be the bravest people I have ever met.”

“Why don’t you look at the photos in your lap again,” Kalyn said.

“My family, they’re alive? Unharmed?”

“For now.”

Javier nodded. “I would like to speak to them.”

“Not possible.”

“Then I don’t think we have anything to talk about.”

Kalyn moved into the middle seat so she could see Javier’s face. “Look at me,” she said. “I’m going to tell you something, so you understand how serious we are. So you have no doubts of what we’re ready to do to you, Misty, *and* Raphael. Those photos on the right? That’s Rachael Innis, Will’s wife, and Lucy Dahl, my sister. So please believe me when I tell you that if you continue on this track, you and your family will have a very long, very bad night.”

“And if I were to provide the desired information?”

“They live. We aren’t like you, Javier.”

“And me? Either way, whether I tell you, whether I don’t, you will kill me, no?”

“You tell us what we want to know, and I leave you here, handcuffed to a picnic table. Maybe someone finds you tomorrow. Doesn’t matter. By then, we’ll be gone.”

“I don’t know that I believe you. If the tables were turned around the other way, I would get the information I needed, and then I would murder you.”

“What’d I just say? We aren’t like you.”

He looked out the window again, said finally, “I am afraid you won’t be pleased with my information, as I am only a small variable in the equation.”

“Just tell us what you know.”

As he spoke, he watched the color of the desert move through darkening shades of purple, noticed the mist slithering up the mountains. “It has been the same way every time. A man named Jonathan calls me and says, ‘They want another one.’ And so I begin looking. There are parameters of course. Caucasian. Big dark eyes. Black hair with abundant curls. Beautiful. They like my taste, I suppose. Perhaps I have a counterpart somewhere who specializes in blondes or redheads. When I find her, I follow her for several

days. I learn about her. Patterns, habits. Then, when I feel it is time, I call Jonathan, and I tell him. When she's in my possession, I call Jonathan once more. The time and place are set."

"Where?"

"I think I will wait to tell you that. Suffice it to say that a journey of considerable distance is made. We meet. Jonathan is a large man, a truck driver. The woman is put into a trailer, and that is the last I ever see of her. Anywhere from five to ten days later, a deposit is made into one of my offshore accounts. A larger deposit each time. I require this. I do not speak to Jonathan again until he calls and says, 'They want another one.' "

Kalyn wiped her eyes. She could barely form the words, and they came as a whisper. "How many women have you taken?"

"Five. It is not my typical line of work, but the money is good."

"How did Jonathan find you?"

"Various channels. The first time we did business, he mentioned an important name. The right name. I took a chance."

"Are there other people like you, people who Jonathan uses?"

"I have no idea. Ours is not a relationship of questions."

Will said, "Look at me, Javier." The man looked at him. Will reached down, lifted the photograph of his wife. "I want to hear about the night you took her." He was trembling with fear, rage, sadness.

Javier looked at the photograph. "That was some time ago."

"Five years. My daughter misses her mother."

"I first saw her coming out of a clinic in Sonoyta. That's all I remember. And that it was raining and the sky full of lightning on the night I took her."

"How was she?"

"Afraid," Javier said. "They all are. I try to calm them. They're drugged for most of the trip, but not mistreated, if that's what you're asking. Not by me at least. You don't pay what I am paid for damaged product."

Will swung. There was a pop. Javier fell back into the door and spit out a tooth.

"Easy, Will," Kalyn said.

Javier licked the blood from a cut on his bottom lip, smiling, his eyes shining, and for a moment Will was convinced the man was mad.

"Did that feel good?" he asked. "I imagine it did."

"Is Jonathan the man who's buying these women?" Kalyn asked.

“I would think not. Like me, he’s just a well-paid mule.”

“Then who? Where are they being taken?”

“Maybe to Mexico. Maybe they’re shipped on boats to other parts of the world. Thailand. Eastern Europe. I am a blind appendage in the operation, and intentionally so.”

Will looked at Kalyn, his right hand throbbing.

“Javier,” she said, “that was the wrong answer.” She opened the door, stepped out of the car, opened Javier’s door. “Get out.”

Javier didn’t move.

Will leaned over, pushed him out of the seat. Javier fell onto the pavement. Will got out, walked around the hood, finished dragging him the rest of the way out of the car.

Kalyn said to Will, “If you want to wait in the car, I’ll understand.”

“I’m with you now.”

“Then drag him onto the trail. I don’t want blood on the pavement.”

Will grabbed Javier under his armpits and lifted him. The man was heavy, solid muscle. Twenty feet took almost a minute. Will finally collapsed in the dirt, sweating, out of breath.

The sky was now a dark, rich navy, with just a shrinking bar of red in the west, the saguaros silhouetted against it. Will surveyed the parking lot, the road. The only lights, a collection of them, emanated from the park’s campground, a mile away.

Kalyn said, “Roll onto your back.” Javier rolled, looked up at her, the right side of his face swollen, his jaw broken. “What would you do if you were me?” she asked.

“We would be in a warehouse in Tempe. Acid would be involved. There is also this thing I do with a soldering iron and a powerful magnet.”

“I only have this gun.” She aimed it at his crotch.

“One moment,” he said, though his voice completely lacked fear. “If you do that, I will be in no shape to make the phone call.”

“What call?”

“As it so happens, I received word from Jonathan a month ago. I am still in the searching phase.”

“You haven’t found anyone?”

He shook his head.

“Sit him up, Will.” Will propped Javier against the toppled trunk of a dead saguaro. Kalyn took out Javier’s BlackBerry, turned it on, found the address book. “This him?” she asked. “Jonathan?”

“Yes.”

“What would you text him?”

“I wouldn’t. He lives behind a steering wheel. We speak.”

She squatted down beside him. “When he’s on the line, you tell him you already have a woman, and that you’re ready to meet.”

“In return?”

“You keep your penis a little while longer. Do this right, I leave you here. Maybe you see your family again.”

The Superstitions were now just a black wall in the backdrop.

“Here, hold it to his ear, hit ‘Talk’ when I say.” Kalyn handed the BlackBerry to Will and aimed the Glock between Javier’s legs. “Transparence is key, Javier. If you launch into Spanish, if you say things to Jonathan that don’t make sense, that sound suspect, I will pull the trigger. Clear?”

“Yes. You are handling this all very well.”

“Do it, Will.” Will pressed the button, held the BlackBerry to Javier’s ear. They waited; then came the static sound of the ring. On the third, someone answered—the voice husky and low over the speakerphone. Will could hear the voice on the other end, but he couldn’t make out the words.

“It’s Jav. I have someone. . . . No, I have them already. . . . They’re with me right now. . . . Yes, I can do that. . . . Okay. . . . No, that’s plenty of time. . . . All right, I’ll see you then.”

Javier nodded. Will broke the connection.

“That was it?” Kalyn asked.

“That was it. So. I tell you the information and you both walk away?”

“That was the deal,” Kalyn said.

“And my family stays unharmed?”

“In twelve hours, I call the police, tell them where they are.”

“The exchange is in two days,” Javier said.

“Where?”

“Interstate Eighty-four, exit fifty-six, twelve miles outside of Boise, Idaho.”

“What’s there?”

“An abandoned drive-in movie theater.”

“And you’re supposed to meet Jonathan there?”

“Monday night. Eleven o’clock.”

“What’s he look like?”

“Long red hair, bushy beard, weighs over three hundred pounds. Smells terrible.”

Something rustled a ways off in the underbrush.

“Look at me,” Kalyn said. “You’ve been responsible for the deaths of more than a few people. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Ever looked one of their loved ones in the eye? Accounted for what you’d done?”

“I don’t believe so. This situation has been unique in many ways.”

“I want to know if you feel remorse.”

“It is not personal what I do. I did not take your sister because I desired to do her harm.”

“No, you took her for money. But you did cause—”

“Let’s not pretend I am in any way like you. You ask about remorse. You would like me to say that I deeply regret harming your sister, his wife. I can say these things, but they would be untrue. I would know it. You would know it. My line of work does not allow for remorse. Tell me what you were. I’m guessing DEA.”

The whites of his eyes stood out in the growing darkness.

“FBI.”

“You’re very good, Kalyn. I would have enjoyed killing you.”

“How many of you are there?”

“How many what?”

“Alphas.”

He chuckled. “Not as many as people think. Some who believe they are Alphas are not.”

“How many?”

“Fifty-seven at the moment.”

“Any gringos in the bunch?”

“Just two.”

“Come with me, Will.”

He followed Kalyn back to the car, stars now visible.

“You believe him?” Will asked, leaning against the hood. It was the first time since arriving in Phoenix five hours ago that he wasn’t overwhelmed by heat.

“Yeah, actually. I’m going after Jonathan.”

“The trucker?”

“You be up for that?”

“I don’t know. What about Javier? You comfortable just leaving him here?”

“No.”

“Well, what’s the alternative? Take him with . . .” Will felt something tighten in the small of his back. “No. No way.”

“I dug a hole three days ago. About fifty yards out.”

“Kalyn—”

“Alphas aren’t the kind of people you walk away from. You understand what I’m saying? They’d use every resource tracking us down. Kill friends, family to get to us.”

Will shook his head. “Not in cold blood, Kalyn.”

“You can wait here, Will, for all I care. I’ll take—”

“No. Not like—”

“Oh fuck.”

Will didn’t even see the draw, just a blur of movement, then Kalyn standing with her feet shoulder width apart, a two-handed grip and the Glock out in front of her, sweeping back and forth, aimed into all that darkness.

“You see him?” she whispered.

Will kept staring at the trunk of the dead saguaro, as if the man might rematerialize, but he wasn’t there.

“No.”

“Get in the car, passenger seat. Right now.”

Will turned and opened the door, got in and shut it as Kalyn climbed behind the steering wheel.

She flicked the locks.

For a moment, with the interior lights on, they were blinded to the nightscape beyond.

“Keys.”

Will handed them over and she fumbled with them for a moment before jamming one into the ignition.

The engine cranked. She flicked the headlights to high beam, shifted into drive.

The brights shone out into the desert, and the first thing Will noticed was the glimmer of metal near that dead saguaro where they'd questioned Javier.

"You see that?" he said.

"What?"

"By the cactus. He got out of the handcuffs."

Kalyn eased her foot onto the accelerator.

"What are you doing?"

The car lurched forward, crossed twenty feet of pavement, then rattled into the desert.

"He can't have gone far," Kalyn said, dodging jumping chollas and shrubs of Mormon tea. "He had what? Thirty seconds? At a dead run, might have covered—"

"Two hundred meters."

"Really?"

"I ran track in college. He's in great shape."

Something darted out from behind an ocotillo—just a cottontail, two bunnies in tow.

"See the arroyo up ahead?" Will said.

"Yeah."

Kalyn braked, the Buick sliding through the dirt. She reversed, then drove on again in a slow, wide circle, the headlights scanning the desert.

Thirty seconds later, they were stopped again at the arroyo's edge.

"Think he went down in there?" Will asked.

Kalyn pulled her Glock out of the shoulder rig.

"No," Will said.

"He's out here. We either get him now or spend the foreseeable future looking over our—"

"Don't go out there."

"I'll be fine." She shook the Glock. "He doesn't have one of these."

She threw open the door, got out.

"Kalyn."

“He’s not supernatural, Will. Bleeds like you and me. Stay here.”

She slammed the door. With the interior lights on, he couldn’t see Kalyn moving away from the car, only heard her footsteps crunching through the dirt.

Just the headlights now, blazing into the desert, and the last thing he saw before they went dark was a roadrunner streaking between chollas on the far side of the arroyo, a snake twitching in its beak.

TWENTY-ONE

Kalyn was at least a hundred yards out from the car before she realized she'd forgotten the flashlight in the glove compartment. She stopped beside an ancient saguaro, gnarled and rotting to death. With no wind, the silence screamed, though after a moment, she began to discern the subtlest inklings of noise—low bass from a radio blaring out of the campground a mile away, the scraping hiss of dry brush set in motion by a wood rat or a wren.

She scrambled down the twenty-foot embankment and stood on the sandy bottom of the arroyo. It was absolutely quiet, the cooler air having settled here.

She stood for a moment, letting her eyes adjust to the meager starlight. Shapes appeared—boulders, scrubs, ten feet away, the carcass of a coyote—sharp whiff of decay.

There was movement in the sand behind her—crunch of fast footsteps.

A cottontail bounded past.

"You little shit," she called after it.

She climbed back out of the arroyo. The moon had edged above the Superstitions. The car was up ahead, a black hulk standing in the desert, the chrome glowing as the moonbeams struck it.

She walked around to the driver's side. As she touched the door handle, a bush shook behind her and she turned, saw Will.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she said. "I told you to stay put."

"I was afraid if he killed you, I'd be a sitting duck for him inside the car."

She lowered the gun. "Well, you don't have to worry about it now."

"You got him?"

"No, he's gone. Come on, we should go."

"Just let him walk off—"

"What would you suggest, Will? You wanna stay out here all night, walking around in the dark. 'Javier? Javier? Where are you?' "

"You said he'd warn Jonathan off if we let him go."

"I know."

"Well?"

“Well, he’s gonna be concerned with finding his family, first and foremost. That’s our only card, but it’s a good one.”

As Kalyn turned out of Lost Dutchman State Park, Will watched her face —pensive and hard in the glow of the dashboard lights.

“You know, you’ve been lying to me since I met you. ‘Come on down to Phoenix, Will. I’m an FBI agent. We just need you to make an ID. We’re just gonna *talk* to him, Will.’ You had this thing planned all along. Hole already dug.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know if I could trust you.”

“Anything else I don’t know? Wanna drop any other bombs while we’re on the subject?”

She glanced over at him, said nothing.

“From here on out, you start treating me like a partner,” Will said. “I wanna know what you’re thinking, what you’re planning. I don’t wanna be surprised again. One more lie, Kalyn, and I’m done with you. Devlin and I will take our chances on the run.”

They rode on in silence, speeding west toward Phoenix now, a massive, distant glow on the horizon, like a city on fire.

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TWENTY-TWO

They walked into Kalyn's apartment at 8:30 P.M., and before he touched his daughter, Will scrubbed his hands with soap and hot water at the kitchen sink.

Kalyn went back into her bedroom and closed the door.

Will knelt by Devlin. She was snoring quietly on the couch, and he curled up on the floor beside her, the heat working on him like a sedative.

His eyes closed. Through the thin walls, he heard children playing a video game in the adjacent apartment. A jet roared overhead, shook the floor.

Someone whispered into Will's ear. He opened his eyes, saw Rachael standing by the couch.

"So this is our little Devi?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I can't believe how perfect she is. Does she ask about me?"

"All the time, honey. All the time." A strange light shone upon Rachael, like she was backlighted, the fringes of her curly black hair laced with glow.

Will opened his eyes, the apartment silent and dark, his face wet, Rachael gone.

"You awake, Dad?" Devlin whispered.

"Yeah."

"What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "Midnight."

"Did you see the man who took Mom?"

"Yeah, honey, I did."

"What happened?"

“A lot happened.”

“Tell me.”

Will reached up, found Devlin’s hand in the dark.

“We questioned him.”

“Did Kalyn arrest him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“She’s not an FBI agent. She used to be, but Kalyn lost her sister to Javier Estrada, just like we lost Mom.”

“So she lied to us?”

“Yeah.”

“But you aren’t mad?”

“Kalyn just wanted to find out what happened to her sister.”

“So what happened to Mom?”

“We still don’t know, just that Javier took her. But he isn’t the one who killed her.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“What happened to Javier?”

“He got away.”

“Are we going home tomorrow?”

“No, I think we’re going to try to find out where Mom went. Would that be okay with you?”

“I don’t know. I just wanna go home.”

“Me, too, but I’m not sure I can walk away from a chance to know what happened.” He swelled with homesickness for their farmhouse in Colorado, wished he had Rachael’s sweatshirt with him now. He still slept with it on the hard nights.

“Sing to me like you used to, Dad.”

She squeezed his hand.

Two verses of “Sweet Baby James” put them both back to sleep.

A light in the hallway roused Will from sleep. His watch read 4:38 A.M., and there was a woman walking toward him. He thought, *I’m dreaming*

again, because she looked like Rachael—big dark eyes, curly black hair. He got up, moving toward her now, his heart thumping in his chest.

They reached each other at the entrance to the hallway.

“What do you think?” the woman asked. She’d dyed and curled her hair.

“Why’d you do that?”

“So I’d look like the missing women.”

On close inspection, Will saw that Kalyn had used dark eyeliner and makeup to bring out her eyes. Colored contacts had turned them a brown so deep, it bordered on black. Excepting her height and the shape of her lips, she could have passed for Rachael.

“For a minute, I thought you were her. That I was dreaming.”

“You dream about her often?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, the worst are when I dream all the bad stuff didn’t happen. Or that it was just a nightmare, and I wake up looking for Rachael in bed.”

Kalyn touched his arm. “Sorry I blindsided you yesterday. I was afraid you wouldn’t help me if I just told you what I was planning to do.”

“I probably wouldn’t have.”

“If you want to walk away from this,” she said, “I’ll drive you back to Colorado.”

“Tempting, but I need to know what happened to Rachael.”

“I’m glad.”

“One caveat. Devlin doesn’t go anywhere near a dangerous situation. That’s top priority.” Will looked Kalyn up and down as it hit him again what this thirtysomething woman had pulled off, what she was capable of. “Javier was right about one thing,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“You are very good.”

Kalyn let slip a little smile, and he missed her blushing in the semidark.

“So tell me,” Will said, “how are we going to do this?”

TWENTY-THREE

They rented a new Land Rover from the airport, black, with a tan leather interior. Kalyn drove, Will in back, Devlin asleep against the door in front.

In the early morning, in a brown cactus-ridden neighborhood in Sun City, Kalyn pulled over to the curb.

"What are we stopping for?" Will asked.

"I have to get some things from this private investigator. He's a friend. One of the last I've got." She got out, and Will watched her walk up the driveway to the small adobe house.

A minivan passed by. Then another—people on their way to church or weekend jobs, morning coffee steaming up from the mugs in their laps.

Will envied them.

By midday, they were passing through the extravagant wastelands of Las Vegas. Then it was I-15, north through Utah, Kalyn and Will taking turns behind the wheel, even letting Devlin drive for a stretch. They made a forty-minute stop at a rest area near Zion National Park for Devlin's CPT, and played car games through the late afternoon—Punch Bug and I Spy.

They reached Salt Lake a little after 9:00 P.M. on Sunday night, road-weary, landscape-numb, tired, and hungry.

Rented a pair of rooms at a Super 8 and wandered over to the Denny's across from the string of cheap motels along the interstate.

Burgers, fries, bad salads, Mormons.

Ate at the counter, talked out, worthless, Will thinking, *All I want to do is finish this greasy meal and lie in bed in the motel room, watching something mindless on television.*

Kalyn broke his daze. “It’s a little disconcerting we haven’t heard from Jav.”

“I know. What if we don’t before tomorrow night?”

“Things might get interesting.”

Will woke in the motel, the TV still on, barely dawn outside, and the interstate noise roaring through the thin walls. Devlin sat up in the other bed, and the first thing out of her mouth was, “Are we crazy for doing this, Dad?”

“Probably.”

The call came during breakfast the next morning at a diner in Brigham City—a strong buzz emanating from Kalyn’s purse.

She pulled out the BlackBerry and they all watched it vibrate across the table.

“What’s the name on the caller ID?” Will asked.

“Just a number. Phoenix area code.”

“Gonna answer it?”

“Yeah, I’ll put it on speaker.”

Kalyn pressed TALK. “Who’s this?”

A few seconds of silence elapsed, followed by a sigh. “You know who this is.”

Devlin mouthed “That’s him?”

Will nodded.

“Javier,” Kalyn said, smiling. “I was beginning to wonder if you were going to call. That was a nifty little move you pulled Saturday. What’d I miss? Handcuff key in your back pocket?”

“Where’s my family?”

Will glanced at the nearest occupied table, a good fifteen feet away—young couple sharing the same side of the booth, each in the other’s world.

Kalyn said, “Why do you think we would tell you that right now?”

There was an abrupt noise on Javier's end—probably a snort—which emerged as static through the speaker. "Because when I find you, I will take into consideration this moment. It's an opportunity, not for you to stop what's coming, but perhaps to make things end faster than they otherwise would. I understand this is a concept difficult to fully grasp. I'm where I am, you're where you are, and you don't think we'll ever see each other again. But I can promise you we will. And I will murder you both and take great joy and pleasure and time in doing it."

Will wrapped his arm around Devlin, caught her eyes, shook his head.

"What you must now do is anticipate that moment when I have you. What I'm offering is death. Not immediate. But considerably faster than it is currently scheduled to arrive, in light of the offense you've both given me."

Kalyn said, "Hello?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Oh, I'm sorry, you faded out there for about fifteen seconds. Look, I'll make this very easy. Our concern is Jonathan. Have you warned him we're coming?"

Three seconds of dead air, then: "No."

"That's good, Javier. As you know, our meeting with him is set for tonight. We'll handle the finessing of why you couldn't be there, but I just need to make something clear. You listening?"

"I am."

"If it goes well, if it's obvious Jonathan has not been forewarned, someone will call you tomorrow, tell you where you can find your family."

"That's unacceptable."

Kalyn pulled the BlackBerry back from her face, pressed END, set the device on the table.

"What are you doing?" Will said.

"Let him sweat. What do we stand to lose? Our meeting. What does he stand to—" The BlackBerry buzzed. Kalyn pressed TALK, said, "I don't know what third-grade textbook you learned your negotiation skills from, but you aren't in any spot to say what is and is not acceptable. *We'll* call *you* back on this number tomorrow *if* it goes well with Jonathan. If it doesn't, you'll never hear from us again, and your wife and son will die of thirst within the next few days."

He made no reply, though Will could hear him breathing.

“Acknowledge that you heard me, Javier.”

“I heard you.”

Kalyn pressed END.

“We have to change the meeting place,” Will said. “I’m not cool with Javier knowing where we’ll be. He may not warn Jonathan, but I could see him coming after us.”

“All right. I’ll text Jonathan, ask him to pick another spot.”

I-84 west through Idaho. Twin Falls. Gooding. Mountain Home. When they were within the Boise city limits, Kalyn spotted a shopping mall from the interstate, made the exit just in time.

It was midafternoon, and they rode under a brilliant autumn sky, leaves peaking, deep reds and blinding yellows along the riverbanks, the brown hills that rose up behind the skyline dusted with snow.

“Let’s shop,” Kalyn said, pulling into a parking space in front of the sprawling mall.

“For who?” Will asked.

Kalyn glanced back from the driver seat. “You. Look at yourself.”

Will glanced down at his two-day-old clothes—ancient pair of jeans, tennis shoes, faded flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

“She’s right, Dad,” Devlin said. “You need a serious makeover.”

“This is a style.”

Kalyn laughed. “What’s it called?”

“Colorado living. Outdoor man. You could chop some serious firewood in this getup.”

“That’s a selling point?”

“You’re telling me women don’t like the chiseled, frontier man look?”

“Yeah, well, you need a new outfit for tonight. We’re not out to impress the ladies, Will. We’re trying to pass you off for an Alpha.”

The mall was dead. They ate a late lunch in the food court, spread out on a bench beside a fountain whose bottom lay covered in green pennies and the occasional nickel.

As they rose to leave, the BlackBerry registered a new message.

Kalyn pulled it out of her purse, scanned the screen, sighed with relief. She said, “He wrote back, ‘Exit 64. Café at Big Al’s. OK.’ ”

Kalyn and Devlin were leading Will through the men’s section of the Gap.

“So what look are we like going for?” Devlin asked.

“I was thinking all black,” Kalyn said.

“I like these.” Devlin fingered a pair of leather pants, Will thinking, *This is as happy as I’ve seen her in ages.* “What’s your waist, Dad?”

“Thirty-four.”

Devlin thumbed quickly through the pants and finally slipped a pair off the rack, handed them to her father. “Tell you what would be rad with those,” Devlin said. She made for a rack of shirts, squealed with joy when she found what she was looking for, proudly holding up a black silk shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons.

“You go, girl,” Kalyn said as Will sighed.

. . .

He stepped out of the dressing room and stood before his audience.

Kalyn said, “Undo the top two buttons.” He did. “That’s perfect, Will.”

“Yeah, let’s go *clubb*ing,” he said in his best Valley Girl voice.

“With that hair?” Kalyn said. “You gotta admit, Jav has style. But you’re getting there.”

Will stared at himself in the mirror as the stylist ran her fingers through his light brown hair.

Kalyn said, “I’m thinking keep it kind of long, like it is, and dye it black. I want him to be able to push it back with some pomade.”

“Kind of a greaser look you’re going for?”

“I’m not sure how to explain what I—”

Devlin came over with a huge book of male models sporting pretentiously trendy hairstyles, and said, “I think this is what we want.”

Kalyn smiled. “Yes. Good, Devi. This is it exactly.”

Will said, “These are the most ridiculous things I’ve ever seen.”

“Okay, I partly agree, but it’s all we have to work with. No one will be able to tell they aren’t leather at night.”

He stared down at the pair of black suede, steel-tipped cowboy boots. “You guys are killing me. You know that, right?”

“It works, Dad. Trust me.”

“I don’t look like one of the Village People?”

TWENTY-FOUR

They sprang for one room in a motel across from Big Al's Truck Stop, caught a few winks on the pair of queen-size beds, figuring they had no way of knowing when they might have a chance to sleep again. When Will woke up, it was already dark outside and Kalyn was sitting on her bed, hunched over a laptop, the small black plastic case she'd borrowed from her PI friend in Sun City open beside her.

"What time is it?" Will whispered.

"We've got two hours."

"God, it's almost nine?" He slipped out of bed and pulled the covers back over Devlin, sighed against the first gut-prickling announcement of nerves.

He sat down beside Kalyn and stared at the computer screen.

"I'm just installing the software," she said.

"For what?"

"TrimTrac GPS. That wireless vehicle-tracking system I was telling you about."

Will lifted a black rectangular device the size of a whiteboard eraser. "Where does this go?"

"Anywhere on the truck, preferably underneath and out of sight. It's weatherproof and has enhanced sensitivity, so it doesn't have to be directly exposed to the sky."

"How's it attach?"

"There's a magnet kit. All right, look at this. You a fast learn with computers?"

"I do design Web sites for a living."

She punched in a URL on the keyboard. "I've opened a free account on SoniyaMobile's Web site. You're gonna be able to track the truck from this computer."

"How does it work?"

"The TrimTrac device sends location updates through international SMS and GPS to a Soniya back-end server. The locations are saved and stored and you can access them on a Google map. You're gonna be operating this

thing, so here, you do it.” Kalyn set the computer in Will’s lap. “You’re in semiauto mode, and I think that’s what you’ll probably need to stay in. Go up here and click that. Okay, now enable the motion detector, since you only need the TrimTrac functional when the truck’s moving. That’ll save power. And you’re gonna want real-time tracking. Click here, set update intervals at five minutes.”

They spent another half hour, Will familiarizing himself with the program. While Kalyn installed the adapter, computer, and extra batteries in the Land Rover, Will mounted the magnets to the TrimTrac device.

When Kalyn returned to the motel room, her demeanor had changed. She looked pale, her eyes distracted and distant.

“Hey,” Will said, “come here.” She came and sat beside him on the bed. “You all right?”

She looked up, her eyes boring into his. “You up for this, Will?”

“I think so.”

“I need to know for sure.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve tried to figure out some way to smuggle a gun into the trailer with me. Or that device or a cell. But it’d be too risky, so what I guess I need you to know is that my life is in your hands. Whatever truck I wind up in the back of, you cannot lose track of it.”

“Look at me, Kalyn. I won’t.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry. I’ll be fine here in a minute. Just pregame jitters, you know?”

“Yeah, I’ve got them, too. I keep thinking about what might happen. What if Jonathan freaks out when he sees me? What if he doesn’t buy it? Demands to speak to Javier? Asks some question I can’t answer? I’m guessing people in their line of work don’t like last-second curveballs.”

“It’s a risk,” she said.

“A big one.”

“I’ve been mulling it over, and I think we may need a different approach with this guy. The whole ‘Javier sent me instead and I’m sorry we didn’t let you know before’ is shit. I think he’d see straight through it. But you know what works with these kind of people?”

“What?”

“Fear.”

“I don’t understand where you’re going with—”
“Remember how Javier said there were two gringo Alphas?”

TWENTY-FIVE

At 10:50 P.M., Will and Kalyn sat in the Land Rover under the seventy-foot BIG AL'S neon sign, the smell of diesel overpowering, even from inside the car. For the third time in the last minute, Will wiped his hands across his leather pants.

"You gotta quit that," Kalyn said.

"Sorry."

"You are cool and calm and in control." She handed him her Glock. "It's loaded."

"Where's the safety?"

"There isn't one, and there's a round in the chamber, but don't get all Jack Bauer on me. That's last resort right there. If you have to use it, things are seriously fucked-up."

Will closed his eyes. "He's gonna know the second he sees me that I'm __"

"It's like acting, Will, okay? Ever do any high school theater?"

"No."

"Well, you were an attorney, right? Ever represent someone you knew was guilty?"

"Sure."

"Ever get them acquitted?"

"A few times."

"Then you've acted. Convinced *twelve* people. Tonight, you only have to convince one."

"The stakes aren't even in the same league."

"You know what to say?"

"Yeah."

"Want to run through it again?"

"No, I don't wanna sound rehearsed." He held up the gun. "Where do I even put this thing?"

"Just slide it down the back of your waistband when you get out of the car. And make sure your shirt and leather jacket are pulled over it. Listen. If

you have to use it, if it comes to that, you calm yourself down first. Center mass is what you aim for. That's a forty-five-cal. Thing's got plenty of stopping power."

"Jesus." Will looked at the clock: 10:54.

He opened the door, stepped outside.

"Good luck," Kalyn said. He nodded, felt like he was going to be sick. "I know you can do this," she said. "So quit doubting yourself."

But he didn't. He doubted himself as he shoved the Glock into his waistband, as he looked back across the interstate toward the motel where he'd left Devlin, as he shoved his hands into his leather jacket and started across the parking lot.

Will stepped into the convenience store that adjoined the café.

Big Al's was bustling for almost eleven, and, no surprise, 80 percent of the customers had the look of truck drivers—bearded, bulging guts, bloodshot eyes bleary with loneliness.

He walked past the drink machines, saw a black man filling what must have been a gallon-size cup from every soda dispenser—shot of Sierra Mist, Coca-Cola, orange Fanta, lemonade, Dr Pepper—a potpourri of colored, carbonated sugar water.

He headed for the rest rooms, found an empty stall, and sat for a moment on the toilet, making himself breathe, holding the Glock, turning it over, trying to settle into the weight of it. As he washed his hands, he caught his reflection in the mirror. He studied his eyes, wondered if the man named Jonathan would see the cold, callous burning that he did not.

He walked back through the convenience store, heading toward the restaurant's entrance.

A clock above the cash register read 11:02.

The hostess looked up, said, "Just one tonight, honey?"

"No, I'm meeting someone." He strode past her, made a quick scan of the tables and booths, the stools at the counter. Soft drink signs and old license plates adorned the walls. A sign over the grill read KISS A TRUCKER. *Breathe, Will. Breathe.* The place was packed. Smell of fried things, onions, old coffee, bacon, body odor, eons of accumulated cigarette smoke. *Long*

red hair, bushy beard, weighs over three hundred pounds. Aside from the long red hair, Javier's description matches a third of the custom—There.

In the last booth, not far from the kitchen doors, an enormous man with braids of red hair and an unkempt beard occupied an entire bench seat. His back was to the wall, and he was staring at Will. *You aren't breathing.* Will breathed, then moved carefully across the checkered floor to the booth, the man watching him with uncertainty.

The food on the table could have fed five, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, all major fried-food groups represented.

Will slid into the booth.

"Jonathan?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

Breathe. Will's lower lip ached to tremble. He bit his tongue, glared at the man, summoning all the hate in his arsenal. *He had a hand in taking Rachael.*

"Once more. You Jonathan?" The man returned the onion ring he'd been holding to the basket and wiped the grease from his hands onto his size XXX T-shirt, which displayed three naked women engaged in some act that was indeterminate due to the stretched, faded quality of the cotton.

When he started to rise, Will pulled the Glock from his waistband, set it on the table, the barrel pointed at Jonathan, his finger on the trigger.

"You crazy?" The man's eyes cut to every corner of the restaurant, but Will didn't move. "Where's Jav?" Jonathan whispered.

"Jav went to be with the Lord." Will wiped his right hand on his pants under the table, sweat running down his sides. He tapped the Glock on the table. "Should I put this away or—"

"Yes. Nobody told me nothing about this. Who are you?"

It hadn't occurred to Will that he might be asked to give his name, and he said the first thing that popped into his head: "Never mind what my name is. We discovered that Jav had this little operation going on the side. And you know what the upsetting thing was? He never shared."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I have the product."

Jonathan picked up an enormous hamburger and bit into it, juice and catsup running down his chin. He wiped his forearm across his mouth and spoke as he chewed.

“You think I’m gonna do business with someone I never met, never seen, never heard of? That how *you* do business?”

Will exhaled slowly through his nose. “How I conduct my business is not your affair. Just for clarification . . . you are ending your arrangement with us?”

“Us?”

“The Alphas.”

Jonathan’s face blanched. He swallowed. “I suspected,” he said. “But I didn’t know. Sure as shit didn’t ask.”

“Are we doing business tonight, Jonathan? I need to know right now.”

Will set the Glock back on the table.

Jonathan sighed. “Yeah. Course we are. Course we are. And I apologize if I—”

“Just shut the fuck up. I’m tired, and I’d like to get some sleep. Where’s your truck?”

“Space one fifty-one.”

“Be there in five.”

TWENTY-SIX

Will unlocked the Land Rover, climbed into the driver's seat, and shut the door. Kalyn lay silent and unmoving across the backseat, and when he glanced at her, he couldn't help seeing Rachael, and it hit him again that she'd been through all this alone, without him.

"He went for it," Will said.

Kalyn didn't move. "What now?"

"We're meeting him at his truck."

"How do you feel?"

"Like someone jammed an adrenaline shot into my heart."

"Yeah, it's a rush, huh?"

"Kalyn, it's not too late. We can still just drive away, forget this whole thing. You sure you wanna be put in the back of a trailer? God knows where it's going."

"Of course I don't, Will. I'm scared beyond shitless. But in spite of the fear, I want to know what happened to my sister. She went through exactly what I'm getting ready to experience. Nobody tracking her. Nobody watching her back."

Will cranked the engine, shifted into drive. He pulled around the side of the building that housed the restaurant and convenience store, soon found himself driving through row after row of semis, at least a hundred of them, dark and dormant, their drivers asleep for the night. Will lifted the TrimTrac device from the passenger seat, slipped it in his pocket.

"Kalyn, I'm worried. What do I do when the next transfer is made? What if he just passes you on to another truck?"

"There's no way of knowing what'll happen, where I'll wind up. You just be close and ready to improvise. But listen, don't get yourself and your daughter killed over this, okay?"

Up ahead, just a hulking shadow in the dark, Jonathan stood waiting, the back of the trailer already open.

"I see him," Will said. "Get ready."

He parked the Land Rover behind the truck and killed the engine, then stepped out, slammed the door. He didn't like his surroundings—dark, quiet, a thousand places for someone to hide.

"Where is she?" Jonathan asked.

"Unconscious in the backseat."

Impossibly, Jonathan managed to hoist his gigantic frame up into the trailer. In the poor light, Will could just make out large cylindrical containers, wondered briefly what Jonathan's ostensible cargo was.

Will opened the door, reached under Kalyn's arms, and pulled her carefully out of the backseat. Then he slung her up so she draped over his shoulder and started toward the truck, her chest heaving against his back. *Settle down, Kalyn. Settle down.*

"Got a pretty one there?" Jonathan asked.

Will made no reply, just gave Kalyn's thigh a gentle squeeze.

At the back of the trailer, Jonathan pulled Kalyn off Will's shoulders and placed her down. He knelt beside her, ran his hands over her legs, arms, between her thighs.

"What do you think you're doing?" Will said.

"My ass is on the line now. I'll rest easier knowing it's coming into my possession with only the clothes on its body. And that you haven't done nothing to it." He continued to frisk her. "Taller than the others, ain't it?"

"You tell me. I haven't seen the others."

"Jav pick this one out?"

"Yes."

Jonathan struggled onto his feet and dragged Kalyn back into the darkness of the trailer.

Will took the TrimTrac out of his pocket as Jonathan fumbled with a set of keys. He ran his hands under the metal step beneath the Idaho license plate.

A door in back of the trailer creaked open. Kalyn slid along the floor.

Will couldn't find a surface large enough for all the magnets.

A door slammed, keys jangling. *Fuck.* Jonathan lumbered toward him as Will's hands passed over the largest flat surface he'd yet encountered. He lifted the device to the metal, felt the magnetic pull as the TrimTrac locked into place with an audible *clang.*

Will crept around the corner of the trailer, stood up, unzipped his pants.

“The fuck are you doing?” Jonathan said.

“What’s it look like?” Will zipped his pants and spun around, Jonathan staring at him. “We done here?” Will said.

“Yeah. Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I’m gonna have to tell my contact that Javier is no longer selecting. Up to the buyer if he wants to use you guys again. Won’t have nothing to do with me. I just wanna be clear so you don’t . . . if it turns out we can’t do business again, won’t be me ending the relationship.”

Will walked to the Land Rover and, despite his trembling hands, managed to get in and start it. He turned around between the rows of trucks and drove slowly away, watching Jonathan in the rearview mirror, and fighting against the thought that he’d seen the last he’d ever see of Kalyn Sharp.

The Last Frontier

TWENTY-SEVEN

Will and Devlin sat in the backseat of the Land Rover outside their motel room, staring at the computer screen.

“That woman has balls,” Devlin said.

“Yeah, she does.”

“So what are we looking at?”

“This is a Google map of the Boise area.”

“The truck’s not moving yet?”

“Doesn’t seem to be. Maybe Jonathan’s taking a nap before he hits the road. We should probably do the same.” He opened the door. “Come on. I’ve got this thing set to fire up when the truck starts to move.”

Will found it almost impossible to sleep, afraid he wouldn’t hear the electronic notification that the TrimTrac had changed positions. But with the computer sitting on the bedside table, humming quietly, he finally succumbed.

His dreams came in waves, repetitive and fevered. He dreamed he woke up and the computer was gone. Dreamed it had melted into a puddle of plastic, got fried by a lightning strike. Dreamed he slept for two weeks and never heard a thing.

His eyes shot open at 4:14 A.M. He sat up in bed, instantly awake. The computer was making noise—some kind of digital alarm. He turned on the bedside table lamp and opened the laptop. As the screen sprung to life, his eyes came into focus and he saw that the icon on the Google map was no longer across the interstate at exit 64.

He shook his daughter out of sleep, and when her eyes opened, he said, “Time to go, Devi. They’re on the move.”

. . .

By the time Will merged southbound onto I-84, Jonathan's truck had a ten-mile head start. He'd set Devlin up in the backseat with the computer, given her a crash course, and she now knew the program as well as he did, calling out updates every couple of minutes.

At sunup, they were speeding east through Twin Falls.

As morning swung into full gear, they were heading northbound on I-15, climbing steadily into the high country of southwest Montana.

They gave Jonathan's truck a solid five-mile berth, and what had been pure exhilaration at the outset soon deteriorated into mind-numbing monotony.

There was no stopping.

Dillon. Butte. Helena. Big Sky Country.

On the plains, ten miles north of Great Falls, it occurred to Will where Jonathan was heading, and Devlin must've heard him sigh, because she said, "What's wrong, Dad?"

"He's going to Canada."

"Cool, I've never—"

"No, not cool, Devi. We have a gun in the car and we're fugitives."

"That gun's illegal?"

"It is in Canada."

"But we have identification for Joe and Samantha Foster, right?"

It was true. Will carried Social Security cards, a driver's license, passports, and certified copies of their birth certificates at all times, though he'd had only one interaction with law enforcement—a city cop at a DUI checkpoint near their home in Colorado.

They stopped in the town of Shelby, Montana, thirty miles south of the border, and after thirteen straight hours of driving, Will's legs cramped as he stepped out of the Land Rover and swiped his credit card at the pump. While the tank filled with gas, he stashed the small Glock in his leather jacket and approached a pair of Dumpsters behind the convenience store.

The gun clanged inside the empty bin.

In the store, Will used the rest room, and he and Devlin loaded up on junk food, soft drinks, coffee, packs of NoDoz.

By the time they were back on the road, it was evening, and the little icon representing Jonathan's truck on the Google map stood motionless for the first time all day on the Montana-Alberta border.

“I need you to listen to me, baby girl. What’s your name?”

“Samantha Foster.”

“Where do you live?”

“Mancos, Colorado.”

“What’s my name?”

“Joseph Foster.”

“Why are we going to Canada?”

“To follow a renegade FBI agent in the back of a transfer—”

“Not funny. The Canadian border agents won’t have a sense of humor. What they do have is the power to detain us—on any old whim. Something goes wrong? That’s it for Kalyn. So you be respectful, give the information requested, but nothing more. The story is, that you and I are going to visit a friend in Calgary.”

“Shouldn’t I be in school?”

“You’re home-schooled.”

“What’s our friend’s name?”

“Nathan Banks.”

“How long are we staying?”

“A week.”

“You’re a really good liar, Dad.”

The man who knocked on Will’s window was young and garbed in dark clothes.

Will lowered his window. It was already night and bitterly cold.

The customs officer said, “Both of you step out of the car, please.”

Will had their Social Security cards and birth certificates in the sleeve of a notebook.

“Our documents and my driver’s license,” he said.

The man took the notebook and began to examine their papers as another customs officer emerged from the small Canada Border Agency shack, a long Maglite in his hand.

As he climbed under the Land Rover to inspect it, the first officer asked why they were coming into Canada. Where were they going? Coming

from? Did they have any firearms? Alcohol? Tobacco? Pets? Plants? Anything to declare?

"Just my watch and a computer."

The officer helped them fill out a B4 form while the other man opened a door and shone the flashlight inside the car. After a moment, he came over and joined them.

"All in order?" his partner asked.

"Almost."

Almost?

The man who'd searched the Land Rover asked, "How long are you two planning to stay in Canada?"

"A week," Will said.

"So where's your luggage?"

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Devlin said, "We had an accident in Montana."

"What kind of accident?"

"We came over a mountain pass and I guess the air pressure blew two corks out of the bottles of wine in our suitcase. Ruined everything. We threw the suitcase away. We'll buy new clothes and stuff in Calgary."

The customs officers glanced at each other, gave a brief nod, then the man with the Maglite said, "Have a safe trip."

They stopped in Lethbridge, four miles from where the Google map said Jonathan's truck had been for the last fifty minutes.

Stayed at an inn outside of town, ate takeout in their room, and slept hard and without dreams until the computer woke them at three in the morning with notification that the truck was on the move again.

The next twenty-four hours were murder. They followed Alberta Provincial Highway 2 for three hundred miles, north through Calgary, Red Deer, all the way to Edmonton, where they picked up the Alaska Highway, spent the afternoon blasting northwest through Alberta, taking turns driving.

Whitecourt. Valleyview. Grande Prairie.

Near Dawson Creek, they came within a mile of Jonathan's truck as it stopped in town to gas up.

Evening approached and they prayed, hoped, begged the truck would stop, both starving, their eyes burning after a second full day on the road.

But Jonathan didn't stop. He continued on that northwest trajectory, driving right on into the night through the uncitied wilds of northern British Columbia, on the most desolate two-lane stretch of highway they'd ever seen, Will driving, popping NoDoz with a chaser of flat Mountain Dew or cold coffee, the computer now in the front passenger seat, angled toward him, Devlin having long since fallen asleep.

It wasn't his mind that was the problem, but his vision. With the exception of a gas stop in Fort St. John, Will had been on the road for twenty-four hours, and there was nothing NoDoz could do to recharge his eyes.

They passed into Yukon as the sun breathed its first shot of warmth into the sky.

Devlin stirred, sat up suddenly in the backseat. "Dad? You okay?"

"I don't even know how to describe how tired I feel right now. Worse than cramming for the bar."

Devlin reached forward and lifted the computer into the backseat.

"He's just ahead in a town called Whitehorse, Yukon," she said. "I think he stopped."

"Are you serious?"

"The icon hasn't moved in the last ten minutes."

"Thank God. You were about to pull driving duty."

They stopped at the first gas station they came to, just past the small airport in Yukon's capital city.

Will turned off the car and shut his eyes.

"Wake me when he's on the move again."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Will had just begun to dream, when his daughter's voice broke through.

"He's moving, Dad."

"You are fucking kidding me." Will rubbed his eyes, felt like he'd been asleep less than ten minutes, but the sun was above the horizon now, early rays glittering on the waters of the Yukon River. *Pretty country up here,* he thought, looking out at rolling foothills covered with fir trees.

According to the dashboard clock, he'd slept for almost two hours, though the brief reprieve had barely made a dent in his exhaustion. He turned the ignition, drove the Land Rover slowly through town, letting the truck put a few more miles of distance between them.

"You need to talk to me," he said. "I'll nod off, end up running us off the road."

"I can drive."

"Not yet."

"What do you wanna talk about?"

"I don't care. Just engage me. Take my mind off how tired I am."

Devlin was quiet for a moment, staring out the tinted glass as they passed through downtown Whitehorse.

"Okay," she said finally, "do you think Kalyn's pretty?"

Will straightened in his seat. "Well," he said, "I think that did the trick."

"No, you have to answer my question."

Whitehorse was fading away in the side mirrors, and they had the Alaska Highway all to themselves, a corridor of pavement through a forest of black spruce.

"Sure, she's pretty."

"You like her?"

"Excuse me?"

"In school, we have this rating system. You can like someone. You can *like* like them. Or you can *like like* like them."

Will laughed. "So what was your rating with little Ben over the summer?"

“We’re not talking about me right now, Dad.”

“I don’t know, Devi. What do you think? That these last few days have been one big date? This is an incredibly stressful time, and I—”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t like her.”

He caught her eyes in the rearview mirror. “Look, I’m not saying this to judge or be mean, but Kalyn’s a damaged person, Dev. Nothing against her. I’m just saying I think she’s had a really hard time since her sister disappeared.”

“Harder than us with Mom?”

“Yeah. Why are you asking me all this? You *want* me to like her?”

“I guess it’d be all right. I mean, you haven’t dated anyone since Mom. Aren’t you, like, lonely?”

“You don’t like it, just the two of us?”

“No, I do, it’s just—Dad!”

Will’s eyes cut from the rearview mirror back to the windshield.

An enormous bull moose stood straddling the dotted white line of the Alaska Highway, thirty yards ahead.

Will slammed down on the brake pedal, lunging forward, something shooting through the space between the front seats, smashing into the dashboard.

“Devlin!”

The Land Rover skidded to a stop, the front bumper five feet from the moose, which just stood there staring dully at will through the windshield. He looked in the backseat, confirmed that Devlin was buckled in, safe but rattled, tears streaming down her face.

“No, honey, don’t cry. It’s okay. We’re all right.”

She shook her head, and Will’s stomach fell. He glanced down. Near the gearshift, in the front passenger seat, on both floorboards, and on his lap lay pieces of the computer, and the portion of the screen still attached to the shattered keyboard was black.

“Oh God,” he said.

“We can still find her, right?”

“Oh God.”

“Dad?”

He drove around the giant moose and floored the accelerator.

It was midday before Will finally spotted Jonathan's truck, pulling away from the border station into the state of Alaska.

He and Devlin spent fifteen agonizing minutes talking with the American customs official, Will thinking the officer had probably sensed his impatience and decided to ask more questions than he otherwise would have. By the time they were on the road again and passing a sign welcoming them to the "Last Frontier State," Will figured Jonathan had at least a twenty-mile head start.

He pushed the Land Rover to eighty-five, speeding along the Alaska Highway, passing RVs at the rate of one every couple of miles. In the nowhere town of Tok, Alaska, ninety-three miles west of the border, Will came to what he'd dreaded more than anything—a fork in the road. Stay straight on Alaska 1, head west to Fairbanks. Or make a left onto Alaska 2 and head south toward Anchorage.

"Which way, Dad?"

Will pulled onto the shoulder, shifted the car into park.

"Fairbanks is two hundred miles that way," he said. "Kind of in the middle of the state. I don't know much about it. Anchorage is in the south, on the coast."

"How close do you think we are to the truck?"

"I don't know."

"Dad—"

"Just give me a minute here, Dev!"

After thirty seconds of the most excruciating deliberation he'd ever put himself through, he finally shifted into drive and stomped the gas.

"Anchorage?" Devlin asked as the Land Rover accelerated to ninety miles per hour.

"It's a shipping city. Lots of ports. I have a feeling they're putting Kalyn on a boat."

"Are you sure?"

"No, baby girl. Nowhere close to sure."

TWENTY-NINE

When Kalyn woke, the truck was still and silent. She hadn't intended to fall asleep, but the boredom and emotional heft of recent days had overtaken her again. She had no idea how long she'd been inside the trailer, though it felt like weeks. She sat up from the thick yellow foam, stared at the shiny metal ceiling, the two remaining jugs of water, the dwindling box of food. The metal pail in the farthest corner reeked of her piss and shit.

Strangely enough, she felt closer to her sister than she had in years, just knowing Lucy had spent time cramped in this little space.

Lucy was four years younger, and Kalyn had often lied to herself, insisted her sister was a brave, fearless person, that whatever had happened to her, she'd handled it with grace and courage. But locked in the trailer of this eighteen-wheeler, Kalyn knew that wasn't the case. Lucy had awakened here confused, disoriented, and more terrified than she'd ever been in her life.

Kalyn heard something beyond the walls—impossible to tell what through the soundproofing.

A piece of yellow foam turned back, the door to her cage opening. She stood up, her feet bare, the rest of the trailer dark and the flickering lightbulb above her head doing nothing to illuminate whoever was out there.

A pair of handcuffs flew through the door and dropped on the yellow foam.

"Put 'em on."

Flat voice, white male, no accent.

She picked up the handcuffs and closed them around her wrists.

"Come on out."

Cold air swept through the trailer.

"Where am—"

Someone reached in, dragged her out, and then she was being lifted, hands gripping her arms above the elbows. She smelled day-old cologne and remnants of cigarette smoke.

They came to the end of the trailer and she was lowered into the arms of a tall man with blond hair, eyes the color of sea ice, but with less warmth.

THIRTY

In the late afternoon, Will pulled the Land Rover onto the shoulder at the junction of Alaska 1 and Alaska 4, yet another split in the highway.

Devlin read the mileage sign: “Anchorage, one eighty-seven. Valdez, one seventeen.”

Will let out a deep sigh, his head resting on the steering wheel. “We’ve lost her,” he said.

“Maybe the truck’s up ahead.”

He couldn’t bear the hope in his daughter’s voice. “I’ve been doing ninety for the last hour and a half. If he’d come this way, we would’ve caught up to him by now.”

“Where else could the truck have gone?”

“Where? Maybe he stopped in Tok and we didn’t see him. Probably he went on to Fairbanks.” He lifted what was left of the computer out of the front passenger seat and stared at the destroyed screen.

“Is Kalyn going to die?”

“I don’t know, Devi.”

“But probably she is?” Will punched the gas, spun the car around. “What are you doing, Dad?”

“Only thing left to do.”

THIRTY-ONE

They were passing through a city big enough to boast a pathetic skyline—meager collection of ten- and twelve-story buildings—the tall blond driving, a man on either side of Kalyn in the backseat of the new Suburban. The man to her right was young, twenty at most, and he kept eyeing her, fidgeting with his hands, his hair long and black, drawn back into a greasy ponytail. *He's nervous.* The man to her left was perhaps ten years older—buzz cut, light brown hair, heavily freckled. They both wore black jeans and long-sleeved button-ups with down vests over the top, fat with pocket bulges—knives perhaps, or cell phones. She fought the urge to glance back, dying to know if the Land Rover was tailing them.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

The driver turned up the radio—NPR, "Talk of the Nation."

It was 2:46 P.M., and they soon left the city, passing now along quiet residential streets, then stretches of forest, the houses more scattered, only a few per mile, then no homes or power lines and the road gone to gravel, narrowed into one lane, with tall spruce trees on either side. The Suburban was kicking up substantial clouds of dust, so she couldn't see in the side mirrors if Will was following them.

Another five miles and the dirt road ended on the shore of a long, skinny lake.

The tall blond turned off the car. They waited, parked parallel to the lakeshore, affording Kalyn a view of the road as it disappeared into the trees. The dust of their passage had settled. *Something's happened. He isn't coming.*

"Would you please tell me where I am?" Kalyn asked.

The man behind the wheel looked in the rearview mirror, said, "Shut up."

"I have to pee."

"Hold it."

"Seriously, my bladder's about to rupture. I don't know if I can hold it much longer, and I don't want to pee all over your seat."

The blond said, “Take her, Marcus.” She hoped he meant the younger of the two, but the freckled man opened his door instead and helped her out of the car.

He walked her twenty feet from the Suburban to a cluster of saplings, and Kalyn pulled her panties down, lifted her skirt, and squatted.

As her piss hit the ground and steamed, Marcus did exactly what she’d hoped for—looked away.

Kalyn came quietly to her feet, stepped out of her panties, and slipped her hands over Marcus’s head, squeezing them back into his neck for all she was worth. He was a few inches taller, much stronger, but that didn’t matter, because Kalyn had the edge of the metal cuff digging into his carotid artery, the bone of her forearm crushing his windpipe, and it only took five seconds for his knees to go.

She dragged him behind the saplings, ripped open his vest, calculating that she had maybe ten or fifteen seconds before the other men started to wonder where they were.

She found a .357, broke open the cylinder—six rounds—snapped it closed and started toward the Suburban, her bare feet freezing as she moved low and fast across the grass and rocks. She crouched behind the Suburban and peeked around the left rear taillight, spotted the side mirror on the driver’s side, the tall blond in the reflection, his head turned, talking.

She glanced back toward the cluster of saplings, Marcus already sitting up, trying to climb to his feet.

Kalyn crawled past the gas tank, the rear passenger door, stopping finally at the driver’s door.

You can do this. You have *to do this. For Lucy.*

She thumbed back the hammer, stood up, Marcus shouting in the distance, the whine of another car coming up the road.

Will?

Though the side window was deeply tinted, she could see the profile of the man’s head.

Glass shattered. Blood sprayed.

She jerked open the door behind the driver’s seat, the young man wide-eyed, shaking his head and mouthing “No” as he reached into his vest.

Two squeezes, center mass, gurgling, pieces of down floating between them.

The sound of the engine getting louder.

Three bullets left. Be judicious.

Marcus was coming toward the Suburban now, knife in hand, moving awkwardly, zombielike, his brain still reeling after the lapse in blood flow.

Kalyn ran toward him, ears ringing, stopped ten feet away, feeling comfortable enough with the .357 to draw a bead on the man's face, yelled, "Drop the knife and stop right there!"

But he didn't do either, just kept staggering toward her.

"I've shot your friends. I will shoot you. Do you want to die today, Marcus?"

He kept coming, Kalyn thinking, *Maybe he doesn't believe he's capable of dying at the hands of a woman.*

The shot took the top of his head off and he collapsed to his knees, toppled over in the moist, spongy soil.

Two bullets left. Not enough.

Kalyn ran back to the Suburban, opened the driver's door. Sea Ice Eyes had slumped over into the passenger seat, and she hauled him out of the car, searched him, found the handcuff key and a handgun—.45 Smith.

The car engine had become deafening, and then she realized it couldn't be a car, because the sound was coming from the lake.

A single-prop floatplane had just landed, its engine screaming as it sped shoreward.

Kalyn unlocked the handcuffs and crawled behind the Suburban, ducked down, watching through the rear tinted glass as the plane sidled up to the pier. The propeller had stopped. She heard the pontoons bump into the wooden posts. The plane's door swung open, and a man climbed out. Impossible to see any detail in his face or even determine his height, since he was still thirty yards away and dimmed by the smoked glass.

As he walked down the pier, the Suburban's rear passenger door opened. *Shit.* The young man with the ponytail fell out, struggled to his feet, and stumbled toward the plane, Kalyn watching him go.

Now the pilot had stopped. He stared at the injured man coming toward him, yelled something Kalyn couldn't understand, then ran back toward the plane, scrambling up into the cockpit, the propeller sputtering to life.

She stepped out from behind the Suburban as the plane pulled away from the dock, saw the young man lying facedown in the grass. She sprinted the

length of the pier as the engine roared, the plane gliding away from her, skimming the surface of the lake with increasing speed. It was already a hundred yards away. Two hundred.

The high-pitched whine sounded like a buzz saw as the plane lifted from the lake, climbing into the sky. It banked left and screamed west over the forest, disappearing after ten seconds, its engine no louder than the mosquito behind Kalyn's ear.

She ran back to the young man and rolled him over. Lines of blood trailed from the corners of his mouth into the grass, his glassy eyes reduced to slits. She propped him up against a spruce tree, slapped his face.

"Where's that plane going?"

He shook his head and ripped open his vest, looked down at the two dark stains on his shirt merging and spreading across his stomach. He began to cry.

"I can help you," Kalyn told him, lying. "Get you to a hospital. You could survive this. But I need to know where that plane's heading."

His voice came ragged and wet: "I'm cold."

"You wanna live?"

He nodded.

"Then tell me."

He whispered something.

"What?"

"Hills."

"What does that mean?"

"—ine Hills."

"The ing hills?"

"Wolverine Hills."

"Wolverine Hills?"

He nodded.

"Where's that?"

The young man coughed up a mouthful of blood, moaned, "Please."

"What's his name? The guy who got out of the plane."

His eyes grew more distant, like someone had pulled down the shades.

"Was this the last exchange, or was that man going to deliver me to someone else? I need to—"

He let out a long exhalation and the muscles in his neck and back relaxed. He drooped forward. Kalyn touched the side of his neck. She came to her feet, surveyed the scene—three bodies in the wilderness and darkness falling.

THIRTY-TWO

Will and Devlin walked into the rich-smelling coffee shop that doubled as an Internet café, waited impatiently for a computer, staring at the bizarre series of photographs that adorned the walls—black-and-white images of mating caribou. A college kid was setting up on the stage against the back wall, adjusting the levels on his amp and tuning an acoustic guitar. It was already dark outside, and Will was on the verge of ordering someone off a computer when one opened up.

He and Devlin shared a chair at one of the Macs. The connection was maddeningly slow, and it took five minutes for SoniyaMobile's Web site to load. It had been three days since Kalyn had made him memorize her log-in ID and password. He remembered her ID immediately, but her password was alphanumeric, and it took him five tries to get it right.

When the Google map finally loaded, he said "Fuck" loudly enough for the patrons seated at adjacent computers and nearby tables to glance over and shoot him dirty stares.

Devlin said, "Oh no."

The little icon representing Jonathan's truck was already in northern British Columbia.

"He's going home," Will said. "Already delivered her to the buyer."

"Is she dead?" Devlin whispered.

"Stop asking me that," he replied, his words sharper than he intended.

The acoustic guitarist was now crowding a mic stand, strumming his guitar, and introducing what he described as experimental–hip-hop–folk.

"Trace it, Dad."

"What?"

"You can see where all Jonathan's truck has been. Here, I'll do it." She grabbed the mouse and moved the cursor up to the command menu. As she clicked on VIEW TRACKING HISTORY, Will's cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket, stared incredulously at the display screen.

"Who is it?" Devlin asked.

"I don't recognize the number."

He hit TALK. “Hello?”
“Will?”
“Shit, Kalyn, are you okay?”
“Where are you?”
“Fairbanks, Alaska.”
“Where in Fairbanks?”
“This coffee shop near the university. The Last Drop.”
“I’m ten minutes away. Stay put.”
Will closed the phone and stared at his daughter in disbelief.
Devlin began to cry.

Scars

THIRTY-THREE

Will and Devlin stood shivering outside the coffee shop, preferring the cold of the Alaskan night to the earnest warbling of the guitarist inside. At last, a black Suburban pulled into the parking lot, Kalyn grinning at them through what remained of the driver's side window—tinted jags of glass.

She got out, and Will and Devlin walked over, embraced her.

"I'm so sorry," Will whispered in her ear.

"Hey." Kalyn framed his face with her hands. "I'm all right. Let it go."

"What happened to you?"

"Let's swap stories later. Right now, I want you to follow me. I have to ditch this car. It's full of glass and blood."

Will followed the Suburban for several miles through the heart of Fairbanks, coming at last to a Safeway. Kalyn parked in a far corner, spent five minutes wiping everything down—the steering wheel, doors, gearshift—anyplace she might have left fingerprints or sweat, skin cells or hair.

Then she climbed into the front passenger seat beside Will, said, "I've got a room at the Best Western. Head back the way we came."

As Will pulled onto the Alaska Highway, Kalyn noticed the remains of the computer on the floorboard. She lifted a piece of the shattered keyboard, turned it over in her hand.

"That happened this morning outside of Whitehorse, Yukon," Will said. "A moose was standing in the middle of the highway. I had to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting him, and the computer launched into the dashboard. We were trying to track Jonathan's truck at the coffee shop when you called."

"It was my fault," Devlin said. "I was talking to Dad to keep him awake. I should have been holding on to the computer tighter than I was."

Kalyn glanced into the backseat, reached out for Devlin's hand. "Not your fault, baby," she said. "Some things—they just happen. Nothing we

can do.”

“So what happened to you?” Devlin asked.

“Jonathan turned me over to three men this afternoon at a warehouse, somewhere in Fairbanks. They drove me out into the countryside, to this lake. I was able to get away.”

By the way she said it, Will knew. “You mean you killed them.”

“Yeah.”

“Three men? How?”

“They made a mistake. Cuffed my hands in front of me instead of behind my back. If they’d done that, it would’ve made it impossible for me to do what I did. Or at least much more difficult. Also, they underestimated what I was capable of.”

“Who were they?”

“I’ve been trying to work that out. Seemed like muscle for organized crime.”

“There’s an Alaskan mob?”

“Probably an offshoot of an Anchorage syndicate. Turn up here.”

Will took the next exit onto S. Cushman, saw motel, hotel, and restaurant signs glowing in the distance.

“They were definitely delivering me to someone,” Kalyn said. “While I was dealing with them, a floatplane landed on the lake, came up to the pier. This man got out, saw that something had obviously gone wrong, and hauled ass out of there.”

“You find out where he was going?”

“I questioned one of the men before he died, but the only piece of information I got was a place called the Wolverine Hills. You heard of it?”

“No.”

“Me, neither. Hey, there’s the Best Western.”

As Will pulled into the hotel’s driveway, Devlin said, “Dad, your backpack’s buzzing.”

Will and Kalyn looked at each other, said, “Javier” at the same time.

“Hand it up here, Dev,” Will said, and then to Kalyn: “Jesus, how long’s it been since we put his wife and son in that mall?”

“Five days.”

He pulled into a parking space. “Five?”

“I know. Long time, but they had plenty of food and water. I’d anticipated this possibility, Will. It’s why I left some books in there, extra flash-lights. What number is the caller ID showing?”

Will glanced at the BlackBerry. “Same as before.” He pressed TALK, then SPEAKER. “Hello?”

“It’s been three days since your meeting with Jonathan. I have not interfered. You will tell me where my family is now?”

Kalyn snatched the BlackBerry out of Will’s hand.

“Hi, Javier. Really sorry we haven’t gotten back to you yet, but it’s been a crazy few days. I’m sure you understand.”

“No, I do—”

“Well, look, here’s the thing. As it turns out, I’m not going to tell you where Misty and Raphael are, because it wouldn’t matter. I killed them both last Saturday.”

Kalyn pressed END and immediately began to dial again.

Will said, “What are you—”

She waved him off, then waited through several rings before a voice answered.

“Yes, I’d like to report something. There’s a woman and a boy locked up in one of the dressing rooms in the children’s department of Belk. . . . That burned-out mall in Scottsdale . . . Desert Gardens Shopping Center . . . No, that’s all the information I have. . . . No, you can’t have my name.”

She ended the call and opened her door as the BlackBerry vibrated again.

Will said, “Come on, Kalyn—”

“Guess who’s calling back.” She powered off the BlackBerry, put it in her pocket.

“Are you crazy, Kalyn?”

She stood grinning by the open door.

Will turned off the engine, and he and Devlin opened their doors, got out.

“Too far,” he said as they walked toward the entrance. “Telling a man, even a bad one, you killed his wife and son? Too far.”

Kalyn stopped under the entrance overhang and faced him. “Why?”

“There’s a line.”

“Where?”

“Separates us from people like—”

“Fuck him, Will. Let that piece of shit taste what it feels like to lose your family.”

They showered at the hotel, then went out and bought new clothes at a Kmart to replace the filthy, road-shabby apparel they’d worn since Idaho. At a nearby steak house, they had supper, and after days of living on convenience-store food, they splurged and ate like gluttons, just glad to be together again, relishing the company, filling one another in on every detail of their respective journeys from Boise to Fairbanks.

They returned to the hotel, Will as tired as he’d ever been.

While waiting for the elevator, Kalyn spotted the unoccupied business center.

“No, let’s look in the morning,” Will said. “I’m worthless now.”

“Come on, only take a minute.”

They gathered around the computer, Kalyn at the keyboard, Will and Devlin looking over her shoulder.

She pulled up the Google home page and typed “Wolverine Hills” and “Alaska” into the query box.

The search results were unimpressive, not a single Web site devoted to the Wolverine Hills, and they were mentioned just two times in passing: under a place-name listing titled “Minor Ranges of the Alaskan Interior” and in a three-year-old forum posting—an outdoorsman inquiring if anyone had ever hunted caribou in the Wolverines.

“Okay, here’s something,” Kalyn said. “Says they’re a small grouping of hills ranging between two and four thousand feet. Oriented east to west. Thirty miles long, ten wide. Two hundred miles north of Denali National Park. Two hundred west of Fairbanks.”

“I’m guessing you can’t drive there,” Will said.

Kalyn had already accessed MapQuest and was executing a search of the area west of Fairbanks.

“Alaska Three goes south to Anchorage. Looks like there are some unpaved roads that head north and west, but none of those come within a hundred and fifty miles of the Wolverines.”

“Hence the floatplane.”

Devlin said, “So this guy is flying women out there, into those hills?”
“Looks that way,” Kalyn said.
“Why would he do that?”
“I don’t know, baby. Part of me doesn’t want to know.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Will gave Devlin her physical therapy and left her half-asleep in front of the TV. He took the stairs up to the next floor, knocked softly on the door of room 617. Kalyn answered in a tank top and running shorts that accentuated her long-muscled arms and legs.

“Can we talk?” Will asked.

They sat on the king-size bed, everything quiet save for the whisper of the central-heating unit blowing warm air out from under the window. Kalyn’s curls were uncurling and the shower had nearly stripped the black dye from her hair, returning it to her natural brown, now pinned up off her shoulders.

“What are you thinking of doing?” he asked.

“Same thing you are.”

“There’s no telling what we’ll find out there, and Devi’s been through a lot already.”

“I can protect you both,” Kalyn said.

Will smiled. “Aren’t I supposed to say that? You’re challenging my fragile ego.”

“Look, you don’t have to go. Head home if you want.”

“But you’re going to the Wolverine Hills.”

“There’s nothing else for me to do.”

“What if that guy was lying? He was dying, Kalyn. What’d he have to lose?”

“Guess I’ll find out.”

“Or we could call the police now. Let them take it from here.”

“Same sort of folks who never found Rachael to begin with, but accused you of her death? No thanks, Will. I’ve sacrificed too much to hand them the ball on first and goal. Watch them fuck it up.”

Will leaned back against the headboard, glanced toward the window at the lights of downtown Fairbanks.

“Suppose we do find out what happened to my wife. Your sister. Then what? They’ll still be gone. We’ll still be missing them.”

“Won’t it help you move on?”

“I don’t know. Rachael’s been gone five years, but you know, I still remember the night she didn’t come home, and the following day, when everyone came to my house to hold vigil, like it just happened. I feel stuck in that moment.”

“I’m well acquainted with that feeling.”

“What do you want, Kalyn? What do you expect to gain from all this?”

“Peace. I think. And to know exactly what happened to my sister. You don’t understand. Before Lucy disappeared, my life was on this perfect trajectory. I’d made special agent. I was doing well, advancing at the Bureau. Doing exactly what I wanted to do. Making the friends and the connections I wanted to make. I loved my place in the world, but I was also thinking ten years down the road, fifteen. Had it all planned out. Stint with the FBI, then prosecutor. Maybe a run for office. But after Lucy . . .”

“You derailed.”

“Yeah.”

“You can still do anything you want. You know that, right?”

“Actually, I can’t. I was fired from the FBI. A Bureau psychologist wrote terrible things in my file that’ll always be there. ‘Emotionally unstable.’ ‘Clinical depression.’ That part of my life, those dreams . . . they’re dead.” She said it with no emotion, no resentment. For the first time, Will noticed the long blanched lines down Kalyn’s wrists.

He touched them, traced a finger along the scars.

“Last year,” she said, her voice just a whisper, “was rough. I was just so tired, you know? I couldn’t breathe. You ever think about doing something like that?” He nodded. “But you had Devlin.”

“Without her, I don’t know that I’d still be here.”

“You ever feel just . . . broken?”

Will looked up from the bedspread into Kalyn’s eyes, realized he’d never really seen her before. “You’re one of the most extraordinary people I’ve ever met,” he said. “That’s the truth.”

Kalyn scooted toward him.

It was a soft and effortless melding of energies, long pent-up electrical currents with someplace finally to go. They came apart breathless and a little stunned, Will’s heart going like mad, the cool smoothness of Kalyn’s

leg against his arm practically unbearable and the taste of her humming in the corners of his mouth.

“I can’t do this,” he said, and he climbed off the bed and left the room.

THIRTY-FIVE

The next morning, Will was shaving in the bathroom when Devlin knocked on the door. She walked in, climbed up on the sink, stared at her father, shaving cream smeared across his chin.

“Morning,” Will said, and went back to shaving. “Sleep well?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Too well. I could still use a few more hours.”

Devlin smeared paste on a toothbrush, started brushing her tongue. “What are we doing today?”

“Well, you get to hang out here, do whatever you want.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Kalyn and I are gonna see if we can find someone to fly us into the Wolverine Hills.” Will drew the razor carefully over the curve of his chin.

“And if you find someone to do it?”

“Then we’re gonna go.”

“Without me?”

“Yeah.”

Devlin spit into the sink and slammed her toothbrush down.

Will turned on the tap, rinsed the shaving cream and the severed bristles off the blades.

“Honey, I have no idea what, if anything, we’ll find out there. I’ve already put you in enough danger, and you are way too precious to be dragged—”

“You wouldn’t be dragging me, Dad.”

Will picked up a hand towel, dabbed his face. “It’s just gonna be for a day, Devi.”

She’d gone short of breath, her eyes welling.

“Calm down, baby girl. I want you to—”

“Stop calling me that! I’m not a kid!” Her eyes were burning.

“You’re right. You’re not a kid, but you are sixteen, and I feel rotten enough having brought you along. I’m not making that mistake—”

Devlin wrapped her arms around him, shaking, crying. “Please take me with you. I don’t wanna be left. She’s *my* mother, you know. I wanna find out what happened just as bad as you.”

“Look at me. No, look at me.” He held his daughter by the arms. “I’m not putting you in danger.”

“You’re all I have, Dad. You know that?”

“Of course I do.”

“So we stay together, no matter what.”

The office for Arctic Skies was tucked into a strip mall along a river that snaked through the middle of Fairbanks. Devlin, Will, and Kalyn walked in at 10:00 A.M.—when the phone book said the business opened—found a man leaning back in a swivel chair, his feet propped up on a desk, smoking a cigar, perusing the *Daily News-Miner.* The office was small and spare, just a desk, computer, couple of chairs, artificial tree. Framed posters hung on the walls—photos of snowy mountains, grizzly bears catching salmon, the northern lights.

“Buck Young?” Will asked.

The man glanced over the top of his newspaper, blew a puff of smoke out the side of his mouth.

“One and the same.”

He looked trail-worn—red, watery eyes, weathered skin, salt-and-pepper beard. A Yankees baseball cap that might have been twenty years old rested on a mop of shoulder-length graying hair, unwashed for God knew how long.

Will said, “We’re looking for someone to fly us out to the Wolverine Hills.”

“Wolverines? Really?”

“Yeah. You familiar with the area?”

“Sure. Flew a hunter out there couple years back. Here, ya’ll sit down.”

There were just two chairs on their side of the desk. Devlin sat on the arm of Kalyn’s.

“Anybody live out there?” Will asked.

“Oh no. You’d be hard-pressed to find a more remote piece of country in all of Alaska.”

“So it’s public land?”

“If I recall, some of it’s public-owned, but most belongs to the Athabascan Indians. Look, if you’re paying customers, I’ll fly you anywhere you wanna go. But I have to ask, why the Wolverines? Next to the Brooks Range, McKinley, the Wrangells, they ain’t much to look at. And it’s an awful long flight for such dinky mountains.”

“I’m afraid we have our hearts set on it,” Kalyn said.

Buck swung his boots off the desk and leaned forward in his chair. “What exactly you wanna do out there?”

Will said, “We’d like to spend two nights. Do some camping and hiking.”

“You have gear?”

“No.”

“I can outfit you with everything you’ll need.” Buck took a pocket calculator out of a drawer and began punching in numbers and mumbling to himself. “Four hundred miles round trip. Gear rental for two nights. Three people. Guided? Unguided?”

“Just the three of us.”

“You’re looking at around three thousand.”

Kalyn glanced at Will. He nodded, mouthed “I can cover it,” then turned back to Buck. “We’d like to leave as soon as possible. Today would be ideal.”

They went to meet the bush pilot at 1:00 P.M. at the Chena Marina, a floatplane pond on the outskirts of Fairbanks, found Buck loading supplies into a cargo pod under the fuselage of a high-winged single-engine Cessna 185. The exterior of the Skywagon did not inspire peace of mind, the green-and-yellow design scheme chipped and faded, dents in the amphibious floats.

“I think I’ve got you all set,” Buck said. “There’s supposed to be some weather coming in this evening, so we should get in the air straight away.”

It was a four-seater, with plenty of storage space in back, the interior upholstered in light gray carpeting, the leather seats covered in sheepskin.

Devlin begged to sit next to Buck, and she was awarded copilot status. They got themselves buckled in, and soon the engine was firing up, Buck taxiing away from the docks toward the end of the pond, his voice blaring through the headsets that everyone wore: “Should be up about ninety minutes.”

“How fast and high will we go?” Devlin asked.

“Hundred and twenty knots at forty-five hundred feet.”

“Cool.”

They’d reached the far end of the lake.

The three-hundred-horsepower engine wound up, the prop disappeared, and the Cessna accelerated on the water.

Will stared out the window as the shore raced by, the plane skipping across little waves, and he was thinking about their conversation on the drive over from the hotel. He and Kalyn had agreed on the ground rules of this expedition. They were going to look. Not get involved in anything, with anyone. If they found something, they’d wait for Buck to come get them, notify the authorities on their return to Fairbanks. Safety, protecting Devlin—that was their top priority.

The bumps soon turned into smooth forward motion, Buck easing back on the stick, Devlin watching his feet work the rudder pedals.

They soared over the trees. Will swallowed, his ears popping, the pond, the city of Fairbanks falling away beneath him, and he could see at once how small and insignificant it seemed, surrounded on every side by miles and miles of muskeg bogs and untouched boreal forest, marred only by an occasional road and the braids of the Chena and Tanana rivers. He reached forward, patted Devlin’s shoulder, felt Kalyn squeeze his hand.

THIRTY-SIX

For fifteen minutes, they followed the westward track of Alaska 3, climbing steadily toward cruising altitude. That gray thread of pavement hooked south toward Anchorage, but they flew on, due west into the Alaskan bush.

Not even the brown, unpeopled waste of northern Arizona rivaled this level of desolation. No sign of human habitation. Endless spruce forests interspersed with patches of turning paper birch—veins of gold from Will's vantage point.

They flew over foothills, expanses of high tundra. Buck pointed out herds of caribou and a massive white bulk far to the south—McKinley, highest mountain in North America.

An hour into the flight, Devlin asked, "Are there grizzly bears where we're going?"

"You bet," Buck said. "Bears live everywhere out here. And you want to avoid them, especially now. It's late season and they're trying to fatten up in advance of hibernation."

"What about wolves?"

"Plenty of those, too."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Oh, no. You're lucky if you see one. Also keep an eye out for caribou, moose, fox. One good thing about coming to a little-known place like the Wolverines—the wildlife will be abundant. Hey, I think I see our destination way, way off on the horizon. Samantha, why don't you take the controls for a little while?"

Will felt nauseous and he had a crushing headache from the noise.

"We'll be in the Wolverines in just a minute here," Buck said.

"Could you do a quick flyover?" Kalyn asked. "Just so we can get a sense of the area."

“Sure.” He pushed the stick and the Cessna dipped earthward, Will’s stomach lifting, Devlin squealing.

“It’s like a roller coaster,” she said.

The plane banked left.

“That’s them?” Kalyn asked.

“There’re your hills.”

They were only a thousand feet above the ground now, and the Wolverines lay beneath them like a succession of low earthen waves. It was undisputedly a minor range, a rippling uplift amid a vast, otherwise-unbroken forest. They could see the whole of the chain in one glimpse—wooded hills rising toward the biggest mountain of the bunch, a four-thousand-foot unnamed peak, most of it above timberline and blanketed in scarlet and yellow from the turning underbrush. A valley cut through the middle of the range, and it was here that they spotted two lakes, one in the middle, one on the eastern edge.

“You could land on either of those lakes?” Kalyn asked.

“Yep. I’ll set down on whichever one you prefer.”

“Joe, do you see that?”

It took Will a moment to realize that Kalyn was speaking to him. “What?”

She was pointing out her window. “Oh, now I’ve lost it.”

“What was it?”

“Looked like a structure of some sort on the shore of the interior lake.”

“Could very well be,” Buck said. “I called a friend of mine after ya’ll left my office this morning, just hunting for a little information about the Wolverines. He said there was a gold strike out here, turn of the century, along the Ice River, which flows south out of these hills. Apparently, nothing much ever came of it, but it wouldn’t surprise me if there were still some old structures down there.”

“This thing was big,” Kalyn said. “But it was in the trees. Hard to see.”

“Well, there you go. Be a great day hike for you three to undertake. Look, this cloud deck’s starting to come down on us. Where do you want me to land?”

They touched down on the outer lake, a turbulent landing, water spraying up onto the windshield, the plane listing on its floats.

When Buck killed the engine, it was 2:30 P.M. The prop sputtered to a stop, and the Cessna drifted up onto a sandy shore.

They climbed down one at a time onto the pontoons.

It was cold, a raw, steady wind pushing small waves onto the beach, the sky a uniform, textureless gray, mist falling out of it.

Will and Buck opened the cargo pod and carried the three backpacks up onto the beach.

Buck said, “You know a little something about camping, Mr. Foster?”

“A very little. Why?”

“Think you can figure out setting up the tent on your own? And how to use the water filter and the propane stove?”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“I’d stay and give you the rundown, but this weather’s coming in faster than I expected, and I’d like to get back to Fairbanks.”

“No, that’s fine. We really appreciate your flying us out here on such short notice.”

“My pleasure.” Buck waded back over to the plane, climbed up onto the pontoons. “I’ll be back Sunday, three P.M., to pick you up. There’s no cell phone service out here, so just be aware of that. Don’t get hurt. You’ll be here?”

“Sunday, three P.M. We’ll be here,” Will said.

“I hope ya’ll enjoy your time out here, and I hope the weather holds for you.”

Buck climbed into the plane and shut the door.

The Cessna roared, and Kalyn, Will, and Devlin stood watching it from the sandy beach.

The engine screamed as the Skywagon sped away from them.

After thirty seconds, it lifted into the gray sky, eastbound.

They watched it dwindle, then vanish into the clouds, the drone of its engine fading.

Soon there was no sound but the lake lapping at their feet.

The Loneliest Sound

THIRTY-SEVEN

Kalyn knelt down, dipped her fingers into the clear lake water.

“Weird, how quiet it is.”

“I’m cold,” Devlin said.

“You’ve got gloves in the pocket of your fleece. Put them on, baby girl.”

Will sat down in the sand, pulled a folded sheet of paper out of his back pocket—a map he’d printed off from TopoZone.com.

“All right, look here.” Kalyn and Devlin flanked him, peering over his shoulder. “Obviously, the plane Kalyn saw yesterday didn’t land on this lake. Now the interior lake is the only other body of water in the Wolverines large enough to accommodate a floatplane.”

“You think that’s where that plane landed, Dad?”

“I don’t know. Part of me thinks there’s no one here but us and that we’re wasting time.”

“What was the alternative?” Kalyn asked. “Walk up to the Alaskan mob, ask them who they’re delivering kidnapped women to? We’d be buried in the tundra, pushing up glacier lilies.”

Will touched a point on the map. “We’re here.” He traced his finger over the paper. “The inner lake is here. That’s about six miles away.”

“Here’s what I propose,” Kalyn said.

“What?”

“We’ve got a few hours of light left. Let’s see how much ground we can cover. We’ll find a safe place to camp, close to the inner lake, so we can explore from there without having to drag these monster packs around with us.”

“Okay. I like that.”

. . .

There was no trail marked on Will’s map of the Wolverine Hills, but a stream connected the inner and outer lakes, and this is what they followed, progressing slowly for the first hour, taking their time navigating the mossy

bank where they could, bushwhacking through underbrush where they couldn’t, the air so clean, redolent of white spruce.

They stopped midafternoon at the base of a waterfall, a set of smaller cascades above it. Will searched his pack and found the Ziploc bags containing nuts and dried fruit that Buck had packed for them. While he distributed the snacks and water bottles, Kalyn studied the map, tracing their path from the outer lake up into the hills.

“How far have we come?” Devlin asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out here.” She finally located the tight contour lines that crossed the blue line on the map, denoting the series of waterfalls.

“Looks like we’ve covered about . . . three miles.”

“Look!” Devlin whispered.

A pair of caribou were working their way carefully above the lower waterfall, stopping every few feet to look and listen.

They pushed on, the stream narrowing, becoming steeper, rockier, with fewer stretches of flat water and more cascades.

Devlin was leading the way, and she stopped suddenly, said, “Listen.”

Will heard only the babbling of the stream. “Devi, I don’t . . .” No, there it was—a man-made sound, possibly two of them, in the middle of nowhere, engines barely audible over the rushing water.

“That what I think it is?” Kalyn asked.

The sound of the planes grew louder. They couldn’t see them through the overstory of spruce trees, but they seemed to fly right over them before fading away, leaving only the whisper of the stream.

“No way one of those could be Buck, right?” Will said.

“I don’t think so.”

Devlin said, “Maybe one of them is the plane you saw yesterday, Kalyn.”

“No way to know, baby.”

It was getting colder and darker, the mist that landed and clung to Will’s black fleece jacket freezing into flecks of ice.

“We should probably start looking for a campsite,” he said.

It was another hour before they crossed a piece of ground level enough to pitch a tent on. They’d climbed more than a thousand feet from the outer lake, and the character of the forest had changed—the spruce trees more withered-looking, more space between them, the underbrush a violent red.

“Let’s camp here for the night,” Will said. “Pretty little meadow, close to the stream.”

They found their sleeping quarters in Devlin’s pack—a roomy four-person, four-season domed tent. Will hadn’t set one up in years; Kalyn never had. It took them the better part of thirty minutes to assemble the poles and finally run them through the corresponding sleeves, another fifteen to stake out the guylines and get the rain fly fitted. When the tent was finally erected, they tossed their packs and sleeping bags inside and climbed in out of the deteriorating weather.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Will said. “Wish I could say that I’m a master outdoorsman and will have a fire ready momentarily, but that’s not gonna happen with everything soaked.”

“Just fire up the stove and you’ll be my hero,” Kalyn said.

While the women inflated the Therm-a-Rest pads and unrolled the sleeping bags, Will took the kitchen set outside. He vaguely remembered the bush pilot warning them against cooking near the tent, so he found a grouping of rocks fifty yards away.

Pockets of mist had begun to form around the edges of the meadow, drifting between the poplar and spruce, and he thought about the previous night with Kalyn as he scanned the directions for the camp stove. It hadn’t been as strange with her as he’d feared it might be. Maybe they’d take a walk later tonight, talk about what had happened—the kiss, the obvious attraction they both felt for each other.

By the time Devlin and Kalyn walked over, he had a pot of water coming to a boil over a blue propane-fueled flame, bubbles rising to the surface, steam swirling into the air.

They drank hot chocolate and ate surprisingly delicious rehydrated suppers, standing in the meadow as the snow began to fall—big downy flakes melting on the rocks and trees.

No one spoke, and it was cold, wet, and nearly dark as they stumbled back toward the tent, the ground now frosted, their breath clouds pluming in the dusk.

“This sucks,” Devlin said.

THIRTY-EIGHT

They sat bundled in sleeping bags, their faces illuminated by a flashlight Will had rigged to hang down from the tent ceiling. In the poor light, they could barely make out one another's faces.

Kalyn held the map under the flashlight. "I think I see where we are," she said. "The contour lines stay together for a while after the waterfall, and then they spread out again. If so, we're only about a half mile or so from the inner lake."

"We made good time today, didn't we?" Devlin said.

"We sure did. And you did great."

Will said, "Well, we should probably get your therapy over with. Being at this altitude has got to be stressing your lungs." Devlin sighed, climbed out of her sleeping bag, and stretched out on her stomach across the Therm-a-Rest.

As Will moved into position, Kalyn said, "Can I do it?"

"Um, I guess, if that's okay with Devi."

"I wouldn't mind," Devlin said.

"Okay, show me how."

Will unzipped the tent and poked his head outside. Snow danced through the beam of the flashlight, a few inches having already accumulated. He ducked into the tent and zipped the door back. Kalyn and Devlin were revving up for the final game in a three-set match of Rock Paper Scissors. Will would face the winner.

He said, "All right, Devi, all comes down to—"

The high register of a howl erupted in the dark—long, sad, and beautiful.

Devlin looked up from the game. "Was that a wolf, Dad?"

"I think so."

"That's the loneliest sound I've ever heard."

Devlin lay in her sleeping bag, snuggled between Kalyn and her father. They'd turned the flashlight off, and it was black and soundless except for the pattering of snowflakes falling on the rain fly.

"Dad?" Devlin said.

"Yeah, honey."

"Kalyn?"

"What?"

"Just wanted to see if you two were still awake."

"Not for much longer. What's wrong? You scared?"

"No. Well, a little."

Kalyn said, "We aren't going to let anything happen to you, all right?" Devlin felt Kalyn kiss her cheek, savoring the warmth of this kind woman beside her.

Devlin woke to the familiar noise of her father's quiet snoring. Both he and Kalyn had slung their arms over her. The darkness was complete, without the slightest trace of light. She thought about the wolf, wondered if it was sleeping in a warm den or still tramping somewhere out there in the snow. She hoped it wasn't lonely.

Her nose was cold, but the rest of her body felt comfortable and snug in the sleeping bag. Even her toes were warm. She wiggled them and shut her eyes, fell quickly back to sleep.

Devlin's eyes opened. Still in the tent, buried in the warm sleeping bag.

She heard whispering, and it took her a moment to recognize Kalyn's voice.

Devlin sat up. It wasn't as dark as before, and she thought perhaps it was dawn already, until she saw the spill of light on her father's sleeping bag.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

“Nothing, I just have to pee,” Kalyn said. “Will, I can’t find my boots.” He shone the light into the corner of the tent, spotlighted the muddy pair they’d borrowed from Buck. Kalyn laced them up, and in the semidarkness, Devlin heard the soft rip of a zipper.

“Do you need to go, Dev?” her father asked.

“No.” A waft of bitter cold swept into the tent.

Kalyn took the flashlight from Will and climbed outside, zipped the tent back up. Devlin heard her say, “Man, it’s snowing out here.” Devlin listened to Kalyn’s footsteps trail away—muffled squeaks in the snow. When all was silent again, she lay back down and closed her eyes.

She woke some time later to movement inside the tent, asked, “What’s happening?” A headlamp blinded her, and when her eyes adjusted, she saw her father lacing up his boots. She glanced at the sleeping bag on her left, back at her father, said, “Where’s Kalyn?”

“She hasn’t come back yet.”

“How long’s she been gone?”

“I don’t know. Longer than she should have. I fell asleep.” She saw that he held a gun in his trembling hands. “I have to go out there, see what’s keeping her.”

“Why are you taking a gun?”

“Just to be on the safe side. I’ll only be gone a—”

“No!”

“Devi. You remember our talk in the hotel? Now is not the time to argue with me. Do not leave this tent no matter what.”

THIRTY-NINE

The beam of Will’s headlamp cut through the onslaught of snow, and aside from the wind, it was stone-silent. He followed Kalyn’s footprints away from the tent. Her tracks headed down through the meadow, and as he walked, his headlamp seemed slowly but steadily to dim, until he could barely see anything but the ankle-deep snow at his feet.

The headlamp winked out. He reached up, tapped the bulb. It flickered on and off, then on again. He went on in the snow, the coldness of the flakes nicking his face like shaving cuts.

As he came to the collection of boulders where he’d cooked supper, his light winked out again. He tapped it. Nothing. Just darkness, cold, and snow.

He called Kalyn’s name and waited, kept thinking his eyes would adjust, begin to pick out things in the dark, but they didn’t. Though he knew the general direction of the tent, he hated the prospect of having to stumble back to it, sightless in the storm.

The snow let up.

A fingernail moon glanced over a cloud, and the world appeared before him out of the void.

The snowpack glowed. Will could see his breath in the eerie light, the profile of trees, the tent forty yards away at the opposite end of the meadow.

He looked into the woods—mostly dark there, save for where beams of moonlight slanted through the spruce, lighting random patches of snow.

Kalyn’s tracks veered into those woods.

Everything began to darken. It snowed again. The moon vanished and the world returned to black. He fiddled with the headlamp, but it was dead.

In the dark, arms outstretched, he started back for the tent.

. . .

Devlin had pulled the sleeping bag over her head, and she was trying to return to a beautiful dream—back at her home in Colorado, a cool summer

night, crickets chirping, purr of the river coming across the pasture and no moon, but a million stars. She was walking toward the farmhouse, where her father and Kalyn sat on the back porch, drinking wine, laughing. She opened her mouth to speak, to tell them how happy she was.

Will was working his way through profound darkness, trying to find the tent, confident he was headed in the right direction, but soon his hands were touching the snow-glazed bark of spruce trees, and he realized he'd wandered out of the meadow, back into the woods.

He should have stopped right there, but he kept plodding forward, no sense of sight, everything else in overdrive, his ears picking up the steady thudding of his heart, the dry-grass scrape of snow falling on the hood of his parka, his nose detecting the sterilized odor of snow-rinsed air.

The world blinked—a strange electric blue. He saw trees, his footprints.

Darkness again.

It thundered.

He imagined where the tent stood, saw it in his mind's eye, assured himself he hadn't veered that far off track.

He started to call out for Devlin, let her voice guide him back to the meadow. But what if she couldn't hear his words, just heard him yelling? She might leave the tent, strike out into this darkness by herself, lose her way.

The forest lighted up again. He corrected his bearing and kept going, fighting off the first needling tinge of panic as he stumbled along in the dark.

FORTY

Will stopped walking. As far as he could tell, he was still in the trees. It was snowing and moonless and he might as well have been blind. He decided there was no point in going on in these conditions. He'd been on the move for at least ten minutes, and if he went any farther, he might not be able to find the tent again, whenever the hell the moon decided to reappear.

He sat down against the trunk of a large birch and waited.

Within a minute, he was shivering. He'd left the tent without gloves—a stupid fucking thing to do—and the gun was freezing to the touch, so he set it beside him in the snow and pulled the sleeves of his parka and fleece jacket over his hands.

Ten excruciating minutes passed, his face growing numb, the snow still falling.

The darkness held.

He stood up and brushed the snow off his pants, his parka, having decided to walk around the tree several times in an effort to get warm.

Something moved in the vicinity.

He held his breath, straining to listen.

Whispered, "Kalyn?" The sound repeated, closer now, ten or fifteen feet dead ahead, and he'd started to back away from it, when he heard another noise behind him, close enough to recognize—careful footsteps sinking in the snow.

"Kalyn, that you?" He was picking up noise on his left. Now his right. He squatted down, digging through the snow until he grasped the Smith & Wesson. "I have a gun," he said in full voice, panic rising in his chest, constricting his throat.

The snow dissipated. He looked up, saw the moon again, or at least a piece of it. A handful of stars. Ragged black clouds.

He scanned the woods—slim black tree trunks, his footprints leading up a gentle slope. *The meadow's just over the top, I think. I haven't come that far. I'd have heard Devi scream if anything had happened.*

At first, he thought it was a person crouched down twenty feet ahead, and he raised the .45. But as it skulked toward him, he recognized his mistake, took several steps toward it, waving his hands wildly in the air.

The wolf was pure white, and the moon made its pink eyes appear to glow. It loped back through the trees. After thirty feet, it stopped, turned, and faced him again, head cocked. “You’re endangered,” he said, “so don’t make me shoot your ass.”

Will began to follow his own footprints back toward the hill, the moon shining down into the forest now.

He sensed movement to his right and left and behind him, though he hadn’t heard a thing.

Will spun around, looking back toward the tree he’d been hunkered down against. The three black wolves that were tracking him stopped.

He ran at them and waved his arms.

They dispersed among the spruce but didn’t go far. He glanced back toward the hill, caught the white wolf creeping toward him again. It stopped when it saw that Will had noticed.

He heard the three black wolves coming from behind, turned and faced them.

As they stopped in their tracks, the lead wolf moved toward him again.

“I don’t have time for this stupid game,” he said.

He began following his footprints back up the hill, that white wolf backpedaling in the snow as Will moved toward him, its head low, muzzle pointed toward the ground, long tail flicking back and forth. Will could hear the others coming behind him.

He reached the top of the small hill, but instead of seeing the meadow and the tent as he’d expected, he saw only more forest, his footprints winding aimlessly through the trees.

I’ve come farther than I thought.

He turned slowly around so he could see the wolves, noticed for the first time that they wore collars. They were closer than before, all within fifteen feet, and the black wolf on his left had arched its back, its ears now erect, hackles raised, lips curled back. Will could see the long incisors.

And he felt pure old-fashioned terror—primitive fears, eons of old programming firing in the synapses. He lunged at them and waved his arms, but they backed only a few feet away, and the largest of the black wolves, a

150-pound male, didn’t move at all, just stared him down through focused yellow eyes. For the first time, Will noticed the pair of gray wolves lurking thirty feet behind the others.

Jesus. Six of them.

He jogged up through the trees.

It was snowing again, and he thought he heard thunder, but he wasn’t sure with his heart banging relentlessly in his chest.

The wolves loped along beside him as Will tried to retrace his own footprints, and something snapped near the back of his left leg, the click of teeth clamping shut.

He stopped, spun around, leveled the .45 between the big black wolf’s eyes, and fired.

The report filled the woods, and the wolves scattered.

The one he’d killed lay crumpled in the snow, a mound of black fur. “Go find an elk or something!” Will yelled.

He pushed on through the trees, now moving at a solid clip through the snow.

He kept expecting to emerge from the forest, and at last he did, but it wasn’t into the meadow they’d camped in.

He came out of the trees, and the ground sloped for two hundred yards down to the shore of a narrow lake whose water appeared black as blood. *The inner lake.* He looked to the near end, saw where a ribbon of water flowed out of it, knew that was the stream they’d followed earlier in the day, hoped it would guide him back to the meadow, to Devlin.

As he started for it, he heard something moving in the woods, and not creeping or sneaking, but the full-on noise of something, *somethings,* running toward him.

He ran for the end of the lake, glancing over his shoulder every few steps, trying to keep his footing in the snow. The third time he looked back, he saw five shadows break out of the trees, racing toward him in tight formation, kicking up powder clouds in their wake.

It was snowing hard again, and the moon disappeared, the world now gone cavern black. He could see nothing, but he heard them coming, and as he looked back, the sky flickered with lightning and he saw them—*Oh God, so close*—aimed the .45, firing at the lead wolf, the big white one with pink eyes. It was panting, its huge blue tongue swinging out of its mouth.

Lights-out. No way to know if I hit—

Something rammed him from behind, a wolf throwing the full weight of its muscled frame into his back.

Will went down, toppled over several times in the snow, jaws snapping all around him, as he smelled the sharp odor of their scent glands, then on his feet again, somehow untouched.

Lightning offered a fleeting glimpse of where he stood, forty feet from the lake's edge, the mouth of the stream, and the wolves surrounding him, snarling, growling, the ones behind him lunging at the back of his legs.

Darkness again. He'd dropped the gun when he'd fallen up the slope, had nothing but his bare, freezing hands. *This is not happening.*

Something ripped a piece out of his leg and he screamed—more out of fear than pain, too charged with adrenaline to feel a thing—kept spinning around in the merciless dark, his hands outstretched, getting shredded as he fended off bites.

The sky lighted up, the wolves right there, five sets of bared teeth and eyes mad with the ravenous rage of the hunt, crouched down, on the verge of lunging.

Will spotted a stand of spruce trees at the mouth of the stream, thought, *You get to those trees and you climb them.* He pushed on through the dark as thunder echoed across the lake, struggling against the mounting pain in his legs.

Electricity raked the sky. He was just five yards from the trees, saw that the branches were low, thought, *I can climb that.*

The Lodge That Doesn’t Exist

FORTY-ONE

Devlin crawled out of her sleeping bag and unzipped the tent, caught a draft of bitter, choking cold that ran down into her lungs like battery acid. The moon shone upon the meadow. The snow had let up. She didn't know how long she'd hidden in her sleeping bag—an hour, perhaps two—and though, up until this moment, she'd done exactly what her father had said, not leaving the tent, she still felt like a coward.

It had been some time since she'd heard the gunshots, and the Wolverine Hills stood silent now. She laced her boots and zipped up her oversize parka, dug the pair of gloves and hat out of her father's backpack. In Kalyn's, she found the .357. She'd never held a gun in her life, but she picked it up and put it in her pocket.

The snow came halfway to her knees, having partially buried the tracks around the tent. She followed them down through the meadow to the point where they split, one set veering into the woods, the other crossing the meadow, back toward the tent, missing it by less than ten feet.

She was seized with a sudden coughing fit, her eyes watering as her lungs strained against the cold. When it passed, she turned and followed the tracks that went by the tent, her legs sore from yesterday's hike, her lungs raw, her body reeling with every breath.

She pushed on through woods, down small hills and up them again, through glades of drifted snow, thinking the tracks seemed strange. They didn't go in any one direction, but wound erratically through the spruce, crisscrossing over themselves, and, at one point, even circling the same tree three times.

Her legs were killing her when she came out of the trees at last. She stopped to let her racing heart slow down. A long lake stretched out below her, and the way the moonlight fell upon it, the surface resembled black ice, though it had yet to freeze. Her eyes followed the course of what she hoped were her father's tracks. They beelined downslope toward the lake's end, and she smiled, spotted movement by the water, just a few hundred yards away.

Dad. She almost shouted the word as she started down the slope.

Thirty yards out from the trees, she stopped. From the woods, she had seen only movement by the lake. On closer inspection, she saw with more clarity what she was heading toward, and it didn't appear to be her father. It looked like several people, children perhaps, on their hands and knees, crawling around in the snow in some sort of game. In the windless silence, she could hear them, but they weren't speaking any language she understood. They were growling and snarling, fighting over something. *Wolves. Why do Dad's tracks go down there?*

She turned around, and quietly, carefully started back up the slope.

Halfway to the woods, she felt it coming—an insuppressible itch in her lungs, growing exponentially with every passing second. *Hold it, Devi. You have to hold it.* The cough jumped out of her, then another, a series of violent spasms that shook her body and burned her throat.

When the coughing spell had passed, she looked downslope, saw the wolves already coming—five of them bounding toward her through the snow.

She ran for the woods, only fifteen yards away, but her legs felt leaden and stiff, barely capable of pushing her up the hill. She lost traction and fell facedown in the snow. By the time she'd regained her footing, she heard the wolves panting, close enough for her to see their eyes gleaming, big tongues lolling out of their smiling, bloody mouths.

She reached the edge of the woods. The first three spruce trees she passed didn't have a branch below ten feet. The fourth did. Weak, sluggish, and out of breath, she reached up, grabbed a snowy branch, and hoisted herself up as the first two wolves entered the forest. The next branch above her head was barely the width of her thumb, but she took hold where it joined the trunk, climbed another two feet.

Teeth snapped down on her right boot. She screamed, kicked the wolf's muzzle with her other foot, now dangling five feet above the ground. She barely hung on to the branch, her wool gloves ripping.

The wolf fell onto its back, and she scrambled up another two feet, found a solid branch to stand on, her arms wrapped around the trunk of the spruce as if clinging to life itself.

She peered down. Five wolves—two black, two gray, one white. The white one was the biggest of the bunch, bigger than any dog she'd ever

seen, and it stared up at her, its pink eyes brimming with intelligence and cunning, its mouth stained black. The wolves were leaping toward her now, some coming within two feet of the branch she occupied.

She climbed higher.

After awhile, the wolves gave up. The black ones and the white one lay in the snow, while the gray ones circled the tree and growled.

Devlin found a big branch to sit down on.

In five minutes, she was shivering. She considered taking out the gun, but she was trembling to the point where she didn't think she would hit a thing. It had begun to snow again, and now all the wolves lay around the base of the tree, looking up from time to time, whimpering for her to come down.

Devlin was colder than she'd ever been, and every few breaths, her lungs clogged and she coughed until her throat burned.

The sky dumped snow.

She wept.

The blizzard had obscured her view of the lakeshore, and she wondered where her father's tracks went, where they stopped, refusing to even contemplate the worst. Instead, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine her birthplace in the desert waste of Ajo, Arizona—the bone-dry air, how the heat radiated off the pavement, making it feel like you'd stuck your face in a furnace, the desert at sunset, the warm nights, beautiful cacti. She never wanted to see snow again, not even on Christmas.

FORTY-TWO

When she opened her eyes, the wolves were gone. She'd dozed off, her face flattened against the tree trunk, her cheek bark-scraped and numb from the cold. She felt the congestion in her lungs, thought, *I shouldn't be out in this weather. I need my therapy. This could turn into pneumonia.* The snow fell even harder than before, but now she could see.

Dawn had come, the sky a few shades shy of black, and the muscles in her arms were strained from clinging to the tree.

Devlin took her time climbing down, and when her boots finally touched the ground, the powder rose above her knees. She walked to the edge of the woods and looked down toward the lake, the world all snow and wind, the utter silence terrible. She wanted to follow her father's tracks to the lake's edge, but they'd been covered in snow. Besides, that would put her out in the open, and for all she knew, the wolves were lying in wait for just such an opportunity. She'd have to stay in the trees.

Devlin walked along the forest's edge, paralleling the lake, her coughing fits coming more frequently. Every few minutes, she'd stop to listen for the wolves or her father calling her name. Often, she thought she heard him, but it was only wind and her own longing.

She walked for an hour, the open space between the lake and the woods narrowing, the sky lightening toward morning and the snow still falling, harder than before, if that were possible. She realized there must be a leak in her boots, because her feet were wet and she couldn't feel her toes. She was hungry, thirsty, more afraid and unsure with every passing moment.

Devlin was contemplating turning around, trying to find her way back to the tent, when she broke out of the trees and saw it. For a moment, she forgot the pain in her legs and lungs, the fear of being alone in the wilderness. *Oh, thank you.* She'd seen something like this before, and it took her a moment to recall where. The summer after her mother's

disappearance, she and her father had taken a road trip. One of their stops in the Pacific Northwest had been Crater Lake, and there was a lodge on the rim of that caldera that bore a striking resemblance to what stood a half mile in the distance, on the shore of this unnamed Alaskan lake.

It was a sprawling five-story tower with projecting four-story north and south wings, some of the windows glowing with what appeared to be candlelight.

She took shelter under a massive spruce tree, weighing her options. She didn't remember for sure, but she thought the pilot was flying back to pick them up sometime tomorrow afternoon. In the face of wolves and the blizzard and the cold, her choice was easy. *Just check it out. I'll die if I stay out here. Besides, maybe Dad and Kalyn are inside.*

She didn't like leaving the cover of the forest, but with the snow coming down so hard and all visibility shot, she figured it hardly made a difference.

She was wading through the snow now, up to her thighs, and she was as close to the inner lake as she'd yet come.

Two floatplanes were tethered to a nearby pier, so blanketed in snow, the only parts showing were slivers of their amphibious floats just above the surface of the water.

The facade of the lodge loomed ahead—an ornate porch of fir pillars, a huge wooden door, those eerie candlelit windows, behind which she thought she saw shapes moving.

A howl rose up from the other end of the lake, and in light of her recent encounter, it was the most horrifying thing she'd ever heard.

Devlin worked her way through the snow toward the lodge, but instead of heading directly for the porch, she made for the south wing, close enough now to see the construction. The first floor had been built of stone, and the top three stories shingled, a handful of which had peeled away. Long, steep eaves sagged down from the roof, occasionally sloughing off enormous blocks of snow.

She smelled wood smoke as she worked her way around the chimney to the back side of the south wing. There were few windows cut into the stone of the first floor, and she ran her hand along the rock as she moved toward the veranda that extended from the back of the central building.

The steps leading up were buried, and she didn't want to climb them.

Another howl split the silence, much closer now. She glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see the wolves emerge from the storm.

She saw an opening beneath the veranda. Struggling thirty more feet through drifts, she finally stepped under the veranda, out of the snow. On bare ground again, she took a moment to brush the powder from her parka and pants and to shake it out of her hair.

She approached the opening.

A set of stone steps descended underground to a wooden door, and she followed them down, put her gloved hand on the door handle, turned it slowly, but not slowly enough to prevent the horrendous squeaking from the accumulation of rust. She pushed and the door swung open, creaking on hinges that should have been replaced decades ago.

The smell of stale air overwhelmed her. She had no flashlight, so she opened the door as far as it would go, now smelling other things, including the acrid, sharp stench of urine. What light fell through the open doorway did little to illuminate the cellar. There were old tools hanging on one of the walls—scythes and machetes, a pitchfork—and cracked leather saddles, grinning bear traps with giant metal teeth. A wrought-iron staircase spiraled up out of the center, disappearing into the darkness above. Glancing at the far left corner, Devlin spotted something that gave her pause—large metal cages, their doors thrown open, water bowls inside, and pieces of bone lying on the moldy straw.

Devlin proceeded into the cellar, still trembling with cold as she stopped at the foot of the spiral staircase, put her hands on the railing, and gave it a little shake. Seemed sturdy enough.

She took the steps one at a time, ascending out of the cold, rank filth of the cellar. Soon she was climbing in total darkness, enveloped in a silence beyond anything she’d known, the humming in her head like transformers in the middle of nowhere.

The stairs spiraled up and up, farther than she’d anticipated. Then she walked into something, reached out, ran her hands along the rough surface of a door. She groped around, finally got her hands on the doorknob.

That it wasn’t locked surprised her.

FORTY-THREE

Devlin stepped into a study, let the cellar door close softly behind her. The room was gloriously warm, a fire burning in the hearth. The ceiling must've been fifteen feet high, and there were bookshelves built into the walls and filled with leather-bound volumes, the spines lettered in small gold calligraphy. Leather chairs and ottomans stood grouped around the fireplace. An Elie Bleu Medaille humidor occupied an end table.

The fire was low, only a few logs remaining. Devlin sat on the hearth, removed her gloves, and held her hands to the heat. Her heartbeat had finally slowed.

She glanced around the room. A door led out of the study, presumably into the rest of the lodge. French doors lined the back wall, and looking through the glass, she glimpsed the veranda, its surface buried in snow.

Her snow pants and parka made too much noise, so she stood up and took them off, left them in a pile beside the cellar door. She was finally warm, and the urge to cough seemed to have dissipated.

Devlin walked to the door leading out of the study, stood for a moment with her ear against it, listening. There was only silence, and the occasional snap as sap boiled off in the fire. She put her hand on the doorknob, turned it quietly, pulled the door open.

The room she stepped into was an enormous lobby, fifty feet high from floor to ceiling, with a freestanding fireplace rising up the middle of it. Its floor was made of polished stone, and open staircases ascended on either side, giving access to the north and south wings.

Her footsteps echoed as she crossed to the other end and stood gazing up the staircase, then down the first-floor corridor of the north wing, which glowed with points of candlelight. Something echoed above and behind her on the third or fourth level of the south wing—footfalls perhaps.

She walked around to the stairs and started to climb, the creak of the steps reverberating through the cavernous lobby.

The fourth-floor corridor was empty and quiet as death, two dozen globes of firelight dancing through the tops of iron sconces. She walked into the

corridor, its floor plushly carpeted, passed closed doors with brass numbers.

Halfway down the corridor, she noticed a peephole below the number designation on each door, and one in particular drew her attention, because she could see light coming through it. She stopped walking, crept up to the door of 413, and put her ear to the wood. She could hear something coming from inside, but it was soft, indiscernible. She was at the level of the peephole, and when she looked through it, she gasped.

It was installed backward, the room all shadowy blue save for the orange coils of a kerosene heater and the candle sitting on the windowsill, its flame restless, flickering. Shapes and details came into focus—a bed and dresser, a desk by the window. As her eyes adjusted to the low light, she realized there was someone lying under the bedcovers. The body was turned away from her, but she could see the person's breath pluming in the cold.

Something crackled above Devlin's head, and the entire lodge seemed to rumble.

Up and down the corridor, recessed ceiling lights flickered to life, one after another, and the warm breath of central heating pushed up into her face through a large vent in the floor.

She proceeded to the end of the corridor, just an empty alcove with a big window and a doorway leading to a set of stairs.

Starting down the stairs, she heard a noise coming from the lobby. It sounded like footsteps creaking on wood. She continued down, emerged from the stairwell into the third-floor alcove, and peered around the corner.

Something was moving toward her down the corridor, and as it passed under the illumination of a ceiling light, she saw it was a man in a black jumpsuit. He had a red bandanna tied around his left bicep and held a pump-action shotgun, its strap dangling from his shoulder. He was tall and blade-thin, wore a Stetson, and had long hair flowing down over his shoulders.

She ducked back into the stairwell, went down to the first floor, and ran up the corridor and back into the lobby.

Beside the library was an archway she hadn't noticed before. She headed toward it, and as she went through it, she passed an opening on her right that led to another staircase.

Thirty feet on, the passage terminated at a thick wooden door, and just ahead, it opened to the left.

She stopped, glanced around the corner into a high-ceilinged dining room, in the center of which stood a table expansive enough to seat ten comfortably on each side and two at each end. Its centerpiece was an exploding bouquet of greenery—native flora. An immense candelabra stood near each end, the candles burning. The set of chairs looked terribly expensive, and a chandelier hung down from high above, fifteen feet above the table.

At the far end of the dining room was another massive fireplace, big logs roasting within.

Light filtered in from windows twenty feet up, the wall below adorned with numerous trophy mounts—moose and caribou with cartoonishly huge racks, a pair of wolverines, Dall sheep, a grizzly bear.

Out in the lobby, a bell tolled—the light, rapid announcement of a meal.

She retreated from the dining room and entered the passage just in time to hear footsteps on the nearby staircase, accompanied by the voices of men.

Devlin turned and slipped back into the dining room, realizing as she did that sound was now emanating from the double doors to the left of the fireplace.

Running water, dishes clanking—kitchen noise.

She scanned the dining room, saw no place to hide. A long dry sink was pushed flush against the west wall, the kitchen was occupied, and there was nothing larger than a potted spruce tree behind which to take cover.

People were coming, and her legs had begun to weaken. She felt a deep shuddering behind her knees.

Devlin did the only thing she could.

FORTY-FOUR

Through the forest of chair legs, she watched them come—disembodied feet and legs, at least half a dozen pairs, strolling into the dining room. They didn't immediately take seats at the table, congregating instead at the dry sink, beckoned by the constellation of exotic glass bottles.

"Bloody Mary, Sean?"

"Absolutely."

"Looks like we've got Diaka, Grey Goose, some Russian shit."

"Gotta go with Diaka."

Crouched under the table, she watched a man in khaki slacks standing at the dry sink, carving up a lime and twigs of celery.

"Want one, Zig?"

"No, I'm gonna sip on this Pasión Azteca. Can't believe they scored a bottle of this tequila."

"I didn't even see that."

"I'll pour you one."

Breakfast smells had begun to waft in from the kitchen—bacon, brewing coffee, eggs, frying pancake batter.

Someone said, "Boys, to decadence."

Glasses banged into one another.

"Damn, that's smooth."

"Fuckin' A."

"You believe how much snow fell overnight?"

Footsteps could be heard from the passage, and Devlin glanced through the chair legs just in time to see a pair of boots and blue-jeaned legs stroll into the dining hall, followed by a voice that boomed over the others.

"Gentlemen! Welcome! Glad you all made it here ahead of the storm!"

The man stopped at the end of the table, his legs so close, Devlin could have reached out and touched them.

The other men drifted over from the dry sink, said their greetings—slap of hard handshakes, small talk of the raging blizzard.

“My brother, Paul, is working on a busted generator, so we probably won’t see him until lunch. But meantime, everybody have a seat, please.”

Devlin crawled toward the fireplace as the chair legs squeaked across the marble, legs swinging under the table, one boot nearly striking her face.

She settled just out of range of the nearest leg as that voice boomed again: “Everybody good on drinks?”

Grunts of affirmation.

“Breakfast will be out shortly, so let me officially welcome each of you to the Lodge That Doesn’t Exist.”

The men laughed conspiratorially.

“I’m Ethan, and a couple of you have been here before, but there’re a few things I need to discuss up front with the newbies. We run on generators here, and they shut down automatically from midnight to six-thirty A.M. We’ll probably shut them down quite a bit earlier tonight. When we go dark, feel free to use candles and lanterns. You should have a stash in your room. You wanna hunt, fish? Gonna be colder than fuck, but either Paul or I will be more than happy to take you out. However, something tells me no one came here to hunt.”

More laughter.

Someone said, “Damn right.”

“We run a sensitive operation, to say the least. Maybe you’ve heard things. We had another group from Presidian over the summer.”

A gruff male voice: “Them boys had fun.”

“Well, now we come to the tough-love portion of my welcome, and after this, I promise it’s all about fun and meeting your *every* need. But we need to be clear on this point. You’ve all been to Vegas, I imagine. We’ve co-opted a famous Sin City saying for our little lodge. What happens in the middle of nowhere *stays* in the middle of nowhere.”

The men began to laugh.

“That’s not a fucking joke.”

Everyone shut up. The only sounds now were the quiet roar of the fire and melting ice clinking in drink glasses. Devlin’s eyes began to water as she fought back a cough.

“Maybe you noticed Gerald and Donald strolling the halls with Mossberg 590 combat shotguns. They’re here for your protection. But if for a second we think letting you go home might jeopardize our operation? If you strike

us as the type who might grow a conscience, or blab to his buddies back home about all the fun he had in Alaska? We will put you in the pan of one of the grizzly traps in the cellar, spring it, and sink you to the bottom of the lake. Let you join our garden of guests who couldn't be trusted. We also have other ways of discouraging you from discussing this place after you leave. I'm talking about photographs, videotapes. Pure, ugly blackmail.

"But you each paid two mil for five days here, so I'm assuming everyone's *enthusiastically* on board."

"Course."

"Yeah."

"Hundred percent."

"Absolutely."

"We know the deal."

"Just thrilled to be here."

Devlin heard something jingle, metal sliding across the surface of the table.

"Master keys, gentlemen. The south wing is your playground, and these open every door. Fourteen rooms on each floor. They're not all occupied—we're working on that—but many are. Peepholes are reversed, so feel free to browse. Redheads, blondes, brunettes. We have something for all tastes. We've even got a preggy on the fourth, if that's your thing. Check the closets in your rooms. Should have a kimono hanging up, pair of sandals. I encourage you all to wear them for warmth and ease of access. Now, I've gotten blood work back from everyone, so you're all good to go. Our women are healthy. Pristine. Protection's not necessary is what I'm saying, but, of course, that's entirely your call."

"What if we want—"

"Why don't you let me finish my spiel, Zig, as it'll probably address any questions you have."

"Sorry, of course."

"Here's our policy when it comes to your conduct with the women. You break it, you buy it. You injure someone so they have to be moved to the north wing to convalesce, we're gonna assess you with appropriate damages. Now don't misunderstand me. Follow your fancy, you twisted motherfuckers. No one's telling you you *can't* do anything you want. Seriously, go crazy. Just understand that on your last day here, there will be

an accounting, and each of these women represents an investment of about one point five million. That's our replacement cost.

"Other things, other things . . . Ah, yes, the wolves. They roam the grounds, and occasionally, particularly at night, we let them in. You're probably all wondering why you were instructed to wear a red bandanna on your left arm. That's to let our wolves know whose team you're on. They see that, they'll leave you alone. This does not mean you should go outside by yourself, or that you should approach a wolf and try to make a new friend. Ignore them if they come around, and don't make eye contact. They are trained, vicious murderers, and they work in tandem, and if you don't follow protocol with them, they will tear you apart. Okay?"

Devlin heard the kitchen doors swing open.

"Perfect timing. Breakfast is served."

She turned, saw two pairs of miniskirted legs in fence-net stockings moving toward the table.

"Gentlemen, meet Alena and Jill. They're on kitchen duty this week for some exceptional behavior over the last year."

Devlin heard what she guessed were platters of food being set on the table.

"Now, I believe that plate in the middle is reindeer sausage," Ethan said. "You should all try it. Little gamey, but very good."

FORTY-FIVE

Devlin huddled under the table for forty minutes, her legs cramping, listening to the six oilmen devour what sounded like an all-out feast, based on the intermittent stretches of blissful silence as they chewed, and the ferocity of their consumption.

Though little was said, she committed every detail to memory. They were executives from a company called Presidian Oil, and all spoke with great familiarity and affinity of Houston. An older-sounding gentleman named Reynolds gave a heartfelt, if drunken, toast to the “astronomical third quarter.” Sean was apparently the son of Ken, and there was frequent lamentation that a “first-rate son of a bitch” named Bobby couldn’t be with them to partake.

Then, as quickly as they’d come, the chairs scooted back from the table, and the oilmen departed en masse with Ethan.

Devlin crawled between two chairs and struggled to her feet, staring at the table, which resembled the aftermath of some epic battle—dishes and silverware strewn with haphazard abandon, plentiful portions of meat, eggs, and fruit still occupying china.

Her stomach ached with hunger, and she was reaching for a strip of bacon when voices erupted from the kitchen.

She rushed out of the dining room, up the passage, and, upon nearing the lobby, remembered leaving her parka and snow pants in the library, her gut telling her it would be a disaster if they were found.

The lobby stood empty.

She crossed the stone floor.

The door to the library was closed, and she put her ear to it, detecting the noise of the fire, nothing else.

It was empty inside, and her clothes lay exactly where she’d left them on the floor beside the cellar door.

As she picked them up, fast-approaching footsteps drove an electric shock of adrenaline down her spine.

She spun around, taking stock of available exits, anyplace she might hide, but there was just the furniture and the French doors, straining against all the snow that had piled up on the veranda.

With the footsteps seconds from the library, she lunged for the cellar door, palming the doorknob, turning it, praying the hinges wouldn't squeak.

She slipped through into darkness, had it almost closed when two men strolled into the library, the door slamming after them. They stopped before the fireplace, just five feet away, Devlin watching through the four-millimeter crack between the door and the door frame.

"Goddamn it, Sean," said the older of the two, a silver-haired man, tall, wide-shouldered, dressed in exquisite navy slacks and a plaid shirt rolled up to his elbows.

"Dad, I feel sick—"

"Lighten up."

"This isn't right. You know it." Sean looked very much like his father facially, subtracting the wrinkles and the gray, adding some baby fat, though he wasn't as tall, or as powerfully built.

The older man put both of his hands on his son's shoulders.

"*Don't* embarrass me, Sean."

"Dad, there are women—"

"Lower your fucking voice. Nobody's *making* you do anything. Go sit in your room the whole time, for all I—"

"What are you gonna do?"

"Me?" Devlin remembered the older man's name—Ken. "I don't know." Ken walked out of Devlin's line of site and Sean followed, the two just voices now, operating at scarcely more than a whisper. "Listen to me. You heard what Ethan said at breakfast, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"So deal with it."

"I can't be here for five days, Dad."

"Hey, I twisted some major arms to get you on this trip. You know how many of my guys would kill—"

"Yeah, thanks so much for that."

"Now wait just a doggone minute. I didn't know it was gonna be, you know. . . ."

“What’d you think when they loaded us into floatplanes with blacked-out windows? Wouldn’t tell us where we were going?”

“Look, Sean, you’re here. You aren’t leaving early. So make the best of it.”

“How?”

“I don’t care, just . . . don’t embarrass me.”

“Fuck you.”

Footsteps tracked across the library, and Devlin heard the door open.

“Sean, come back. Sean!”

His father went after him, the library quiet again, just the fire crackling.

Devlin waited two minutes, straining to pick out the slightest patter of returning footsteps, but the men were gone.

She eased the cellar door open, moving carefully through the library, then into the lobby, where she stood holding her parka and snow pants, listening to distant voices, the clatter of door slams traveling up and down the corridors above.

She wandered into the south wing, quiet here and empty, just the ceiling lights humming above her.

There were peepholes in these doors as well, and she stopped at each to look inside, saw women behind three of the doors, sitting up in bed in skimpy lingerie, waiting.

At the end of the corridor, she turned the doorknob of an empty room, 119.

The door opened. She stepped inside, shut it.

She stashed her pants and parka in a chest of drawers across from the bed, then, taking out the .357, crouched under the peephole for five long minutes, willing back the fear, the tears.

FORTY-SIX

She slipped back into the corridor, then into the alcove and up the stairwell to the second floor. She hadn't gone five steps before she heard voices up ahead. Devlin slowed, inching her way into the alcove, glancing around the corner. The corridor was empty.

She looked back through the alcove window, saw that it was still snowing, spruce trees loaded with powder. Even from inside, she could hear branches creaking, snapping under the weight.

She eased out into the corridor, stopping at each door she passed to glance through the peephole—more women, half-naked, lying in bed and staring absently into space.

Ten steps into the corridor, someone groaned behind the door of 215.

Devlin stopped, felt a knot in her stomach, thought she might be sick.

She stepped forward, put her ear to the door.

Zig's voice: "You like that, don't you, you naughty girl?"

"Yes."

"Convince me."

Through the door, Devlin heard the woman moan.

Zig: "Yeah, that's . . . oh . . . that's better, oh God."

Footsteps were ascending the stairs at the lobby end of the corridor.

She turned back, hurried into the alcove, ducked around the corner, and glanced back in time to see someone emerge into the corridor.

As the person drew closer, she saw it was a man—short, wide, pit-bull jaw, cropped blond hair, shotgun hanging from a strap around his neck.

Every few doors, he'd stop to look through a peephole, lingering a little longer at 215.

Devlin turned and started up the steps.

The fifth cracked under her weight, footsteps audible now in the corridor below, the man definitely coming.

She moved quickly into the third-floor corridor, passing the brass-numbered doors: 314, 312, 310. She tried 308, but it was locked.

The man with the shotgun must have hit the noisy step, because a loud crack resounded through the corridor.

The doorknob to 306 turned. She slipped inside, her heart pounding in her chest. Out of instinct, she peered through the peephole, realized instantly that she was staring through it backward, the view long and distorted, like looking through the strong prescription lenses of her father's reading glasses. She could hear the man's footsteps coming down the corridor, wondered if he'd actually seen or heard her. She turned away from the door, squatted down out of sight in a corner beside the bed, the gun quivering in her hands as the footsteps passed by the door.

She stayed in the room for a long time. When she finally built up the nerve to leave, she got to her feet and moved over to the door, listened. Silence. She glanced through the peephole, and what she could see of the corridor was empty.

She pulled the door open, poked her head outside. It took her a moment to remember where she was. Third floor, south wing. She crept out into the corridor, the lodge momentarily quiet.

When she reached the stairs, she glanced down into the lobby, saw a kimonoed man thirty feet below disappearing into the first-floor corridor.

Devlin took the stairs up to the only corridor she'd yet to search—the south wing's fourth floor. As she climbed, she spotted that longhaired man in the cowboy hat, strolling the third floor of the north wing with his shotgun, his back to her, walking away.

The fourth floor was empty.

She crept up to each door, peered through the peephole, taking note of which rooms were occupied, which vacant and unlocked.

At the end of the corridor, she came to 429, the last room on the left-hand side before the alcove and the stairwell. She stood on her tiptoes, leaned in to look through the peephole. Inside, a woman was sitting in bed. She was wearing a yellow chemise, her hair long and dark, the color indistinguishable in the poor light. Her face was turned toward the window and she was watching the snow fall. Devlin could tell by looking through the thin fabric of her nightgown that the woman was with child, perhaps

half term, her face a little swollen from the pregnancy, and pale, with dark bags under her eyes.

By the light from the lamp on the table, Devlin saw that the woman's hair was a deep black, and then she drew in a sharp breath and her eyes welled up and ran over and her throat closed.

She was looking at her mother.

Scalding

FORTY-SEVEN

At first, she didn't believe it, thinking, *This must be some kind of nightmare or hallucination. No way she could still be alive. That's what Dad said.* But it was her. As she stood there breathless, watching Rachael Innis in bed, Devlin recognized the big-black eyes, the shape of the mouth. Her mother didn't look angry or sad or anything like what Devlin might have expected. Just older, tired, worn-out.

Devlin wiped her eyes, looked up and down the corridor, then back through the peephole as she knocked at the door.

Her mother glanced up but didn't move, sat motionless in bed, as if waiting.

Devlin knocked again, then cupped her mouth and spoke through the door, "Mom."

Rachael showed no sign she'd heard a thing.

Devlin knocked once more, and finally, Rachael stepped tentatively down onto the floor and moved slowly toward the door.

Devlin tapped the peephole and stepped back several feet into the corridor, praying her mother would look.

Ten seconds elapsed, and then she heard a sound come through the door like a gasp for breath or a stifled sob, followed by something hitting the floor.

Devlin ran to the peephole, peered through, saw her mother crumpled down into a pile, her back heaving, weeping.

She ran up the corridor, trying doors until she found an unlocked, unoccupied room, tore through the drawers, the bedside table, saw at last what she was after. Ripping a page from the notebook, she had to wait for her hand to stop trembling so she could write.

> *Mom, I came to Alaska with Dad and an FBI agent to look for you. Can't find them. Are they here? Will get you out somehow. I love you. We never forgot.*

Devlin ran back into the corridor, dropped to the floor at room 429, and slid the sheet of notebook paper under the door. Through the peephole, she watched her mother take the paper over to a desk.

Rachael kept wiping her eyes, shoulders bobbing. She sat down, spent thirty seconds scribbling on the sheet of paper. Then she got up, hurried back to the door, knelt down, and shoved the paper underneath.

Devlin had to stand under a light to read what her mother had scrawled, the handwriting wobbly, as if she hadn't held a pen in years.

Get out of this place. Don't try to do anything. Just get out back to safety and find help. I love you so much.

Devlin set the paper on the floor and scribbled under her mother's handwriting:

Wolves outside and blizzard. Our pilot not coming back until tomorrow.

Devlin slid the paper through. Rachael picked it up, holding it flat against the door while she wrote.

It came back quickly, and as Devlin grabbed it, she heard footsteps.

Terrible people here. You cannot let them find you. Go to an empty room and hide there until you can leave. You have to listen to me. I love you. Now go.

The footsteps were coming up from the lobby stairs. Devlin took the sheet of paper, wrote "I love you," and held the message up to the peephole,

then moved quickly into the alcove and down three steps before stopping.

Now there were footsteps climbing this stairwell, too, these faster, with a kind of clicking, like a dog's toenails on a hardwood floor.

She backtracked to the fourth floor, glanced around the corner from the stairwell, the footsteps getting louder on the lobby staircase, at the other end, the faster ones rushing up beneath her.

She ran into the fourth-floor corridor, searching for that unlocked door, finally finding it four down and across the hall from her mother's room. She slipped inside just as someone's head emerged into view from the lobby stairs.

She eased the door shut, stared through the peephole.

A long black shape loped by.

Five seconds later, it returned, stood staring at the door, whining and sniffing the floor.

A man walked into view—the tall, cowboy-hatted guard with long hair. He patted the wolf's head, knelt down, let the animal nuzzle into his neck.

Another man drew everyone's attention—short and round, wearing a green kimono, sandals, with a red bandanna tied onto his left arm, pursuant to Ethan's instructions.

The great black wolf sat at attention beside the guard, hackles raised, eyeing the guest.

"Hey, Reynolds," the guard said. "Good to see you again."

"Likewise, Gerald, likewise. Say, would you be so kind as to point me in the direction of the pregnant woman Ethan mentioned this morning?"

"Sure, right this way."

The men and the wolf started back toward the alcove, and just before their voices diminished entirely, Devlin heard the guard say, "She's in four twenty-nine. I think you're going to enjoy yourself, my friend."

FORTY-EIGHT

Devlin stood outside room 429, the corridor empty, her right arm sagging with the weight of the gun.

The high twang of Reynolds's voice passed easily through the door: "I want you to take that off right now and sit down. You know how much money I've made this year?"

"How much?"

There was a sound like a hand clap. "Don't you fucking say one word to me. Eighty-four million. One year. That moisten you up?"

Devlin thought she heard footsteps coming up the staircase at the other end, hustled into the alcove for a moment to wait, but no one came.

When she returned to the door, she could hear the bed creaking, Reynolds making noise.

Winded, he said, "Feel free to moan or whatever the fuck."

Her mother moaned.

"You know I could kill you if I wanted?" he said, breathless.

Devlin wiped the tears out of her eyes so she could see, tried but couldn't stop herself from glancing through the peephole, saw it happening, knew instantly she never should have looked, that the sight of the small, fat man riding her mother was an image she would never expunge, and a deep seed of rage sprouted up in the pit of her stomach, swelling her throat, flooding her eyes.

She put her hand on the doorknob, turned it, the bolt retracting, the room unlocked.

A hairsbreadth from pushing it open and walking inside, she stopped, willing back the rage. She could shoot this man right now, but the gunshot would summon everyone to the fourth floor. There'd be no hiding out until nighttime, then slipping back to the tent to await the return of their bush pilot. It might save her mother in the short term, but it would kill them all in the long.

The bolt slid back into the door frame and Devlin leaned against the wall beside the door.

She wept soundlessly, praying her mother wasn’t present, that she’d managed to transport herself to another place and time—a childhood memory, her wedding day, perhaps a family holiday, like the Christmas they’d spent eight years ago in Tahiti, opening presents at sunrise on the beach.

FORTY-NINE

When Reynolds had finished with her mother, Devlin crept back to room 420, and shut herself inside.

She waited for hours, huddled in a corner, out of eyesight from the peephole, watching the gray sky fade up, plateau, and begin its short return to darkness. She was hungry, thirsty. She prayed for Kalyn, her father and mother, and despite everything, just knowing that Rachael was four doors down brought her a comfort she hadn't felt in years.

Dusk had come when Devlin decided it was time to leave the lodge and head back to the tent.

She got up and walked to the window, saw it was still snowing, the landscape gray and bleak. The long inner lake was wind-stirred, small waves lapping at the snowy shore, and the snow-bowed spruce trees stood completely white as she looked down on them from four floors above.

Devlin went to the door, glanced out the peephole, the corridor empty from her vantage. She slipped outside and ran down to 429, peeked through the peephole, saw her mother asleep in bed.

Devlin moved quietly toward the stairwell, descended to the first floor, and crept down the corridor, stopping along the way in 119 to retrieve her parka and snow pants.

She finally emerged into the lobby. It smelled of wood smoke, a fire burning in the freestanding hearth, and someone had placed candles on the newels of the staircase. Lanterns, mounted to the walls, glowed with firelight, casting strange shadows on the stone floor. Noise and more light emanated from the archway at the other end of the lobby, adjacent to the library.

She stole up to it, light and sound filling the passage, wonderful smells wafting out from the dining hall, accompanied by the voices of fucked-out, happy Texans.

Supper. Her stomach ached, but the thought of eating snow outside, that she might at least quench her thirst, spurred her on.

Devlin glanced at the front entrance but decided it would be safer to depart the way she'd come, down through the cellar, out the door under the veranda.

She walked into the library, which was empty and warm.

As she reached to open the cellar door, someone raced in, and a hand covered her mouth before she even had a chance to turn around.

"Don't scream, baby. It's just me."

Kalyn let her go, and the girl and the woman embraced, Devlin flushing with relief.

Kalyn quietly closed the library door and knelt down with Devlin by the hearth, said, "I've been looking all over for you."

"I've been hiding. Have you seen my dad?"

"No, honey."

Devlin tried to reassure herself. *Doesn't mean he's dead,* she thought. She said, "My mom's here. She's alive, so maybe your sister is—"

"I know, I already found her."

"Where?"

"She's in a room on the second floor of the north wing, where they keep most of the pregnant women."

"What happened to you last night?"

"The wolves came after me when I went outside to pee. I got myself treed. Stayed up there until first light, then finally found my way here a few hours ago."

"You know what this place is?"

"I'd like to burn it to the fucking ground."

"I was heading back to the tent, Kalyn. I thought I'd spend the night there, hike down to the outer lake in the morning, wait for our pilot to come so I could get help."

"Yeah, that's probably our best course of action."

Devlin got up, opened the cellar door. "I came in from here. I think it's the safest—"

Kalyn shook her head. "That's where they keep the wolves. Come on. I know a better way."

Kalyn led her out of the library, into the adjacent passage, and up a stairwell that branched off to the right.

Climbing, Devlin noticed blood spatters across the hem of Kalyn's pink down jacket.

After two flights of stairs, they emerged into a short corridor lined with several unmarked doors. Kalyn glanced back, put a finger to her lips. Devlin nodded.

They proceeded to the last door on the corridor, stopping just shy of it.

Kalyn turned and whispered, "Wait here for a minute."

"What are you doing?"

"You'll see."

Kalyn stepped forward, palmed the doorknob, turned it, and went inside, the door closing softly after her.

Devlin waited, the ceiling lights humming above her. Then the building rumbled again and the overhead lights cut out, a vacuum of silence filled only by the hiss of the lanterns mounted to the corridor walls.

The door opened and Kalyn poked her head out.

"All right, come on," she whispered.

Kalyn took her by the hand, pulled her inside, and closed the door.

Devlin found herself standing in an expansive bedroom suite with a low fire burning in the hearth.

She didn't notice the man until he spoke.

"How old are you, Devlin?" His voice was soft, almost a falsetto, tinged with a slight accent that Devlin couldn't place due to the confusion and the sudden banging racket of her heart.

He set down a book and rose from the recliner beside the fireplace, removed his wire-rim glasses so he could look Devlin up and down.

"Did you not hear my question?" he asked.

Devlin looked at Kalyn, who just said, "Answer him."

"What's happening?"

"*Answer* him."

"Sixteen."

The man nodded. "You favor your mother."

Kalyn said, “So, Paul? We good?”

Devlin ripped her hand out of Kalyn’s grasp and backpedaled into the wall beside the door. She stared at Paul. His vest, wire-rim glasses, and banker’s haircut struck her as incongruous, given his apparent station in the lodge.

“What are you doing, Kalyn?” she asked.

“Are we all set, Paul?”

“We still have the matter of Gerald. He was a good man. Had been with me for—”

“You can’t hire another guard?”

“What are you doing, Kalyn?” Devlin asked again.

Kalyn looked at her, just shook her head. “I don’t have a choice here, okay?”

“A choice? About what?”

Paul said, “Okay, we’ll call it good as soon as you find Rachael’s husband and bring him to me.”

“And then you’ll fly Lucy and me out of here first thing tomorrow?”

“Weather permitting.”

“How do I know?”

“What?”

“That you’ll keep your end.”

Paul shrugged. “Guess I’ll have to earn your trust.”

Devlin reached into the pocket of her parka, fingers grazing the .357, thinking, *I should’ve taken it out, made sure it was loaded earlier today. I don’t even know how to use this thing.*

Devlin ran her thumb over the hammer. In the movies, she’d seen people pull on it. She tried, and the cylinder made a clicking sound, the hammer locked back.

“You gonna kill him?” Kalyn asked.

“You really wanna know?”

Before anyone had noticed, she was bringing up the .357 and aiming it at the center of Paul’s chest. She could barely see the revolver, the metal dull in the low light. It felt so heavy, smelled of oil.

Paul was the first to notice, and he said, “You stupid cunt, you didn’t frisk her.”

Devlin said, “Go stand beside him, Kalyn.”

“Devlin—”

Devlin swung the gun toward Kalyn.

“All right.”

As Kalyn approached him, Paul said, “Your first time holding a gun, Ms. Innis?”

“Why are you doing this to us, Kalyn?”

“The way your hands are trembling, I would assume the answer is yes.”

Devlin began to cry, glancing between Paul and Kalyn, a knot tightening in her stomach. “I don’t understand.” She barely got the words out.

“Give him the gun, baby.” Kalyn seemed harder than she remembered, something different, changed about her. Devlin blinked through the sheet of tears.

“Devlin.” Paul found Devlin’s eyes, locked her in with a gaze that seemed to hum. “You come here and lay that big gun down in my hand like Kalyn just told you. What? You think I’m going to hurt you?”

“Stop moving.”

“I’m not moving. I don’t know—”

“You think I won’t pull the trigger, but I swear to God I will.” The initial shock was waning, making room for the rage. “Why’d you do this, Kalyn?”

Kalyn was crying now. “They caught me. Three hours ago, after I’d killed one of the guards. It wasn’t like I had planned all this. I told them about you, said I could find you. If I did, he was going to let my sister go. Fly me and Lucy out of here tomorrow. If I didn’t, he was gonna let one of the oilmen kill her tonight. You see? I didn’t have a—”

“You were gonna trade me for your sister.”

“I’m sorry,” Kalyn said. “Wouldn’t you trade me for your mother? To get her back?”

“I wouldn’t sell anyone out.”

“Well, congratulations on being a better person. Now come here and put the gun in my hand.”

“Fuck you.”

Devlin noticed Paul inching toward her, the subtlest of movements. He said, “You aren’t gonna hurt anybody. Fact, you’ve got the safety on right now.”

Devlin knew if she averted her eyes even for a second, it would be over. “Guess we’ll find out,” she said.

Kalyn said, “Dev, no—”

Devlin winced as the recoil pushed her back against the wall, her ears ringing, temporarily blinded from the flash.

Paul’s brow furrowed up and he looked down at the black hole in the upper left quadrant of his sweater vest, darkness blossoming below his heart.

The room smelled sweetly bitter, the cordite burning in Devlin’s nose.

Paul said, “You didn’t shoot me. You didn’t.” He sat back down in the chair, paling. Devlin could hear the fading suck of his punctured lung, the man emitting soft, drowning gurgles. She pulled the hammer back once more and aimed at Kalyn.

“If you move,” Devlin said, “I’ll kill you, too.”

FIFTY

Devlin rushed back into the corridor, ran down the stairwell and into the passage. She heard voices in the dining hall, but she kept going, back into the lobby. It was much darker here, now illuminated only by candles and lanterns. As she entered the first-floor corridor, she heard it—rapid footfalls on stone, people running through the lobby, a man yelling. Devlin glanced back, saw a group of shadows appear at the far end. She rushed into the alcove, started up the stairwell, came out onto the second floor. The wolf loped down the corridor toward her, its head low, sniffing the hardwood floor. Devlin fired off three shots, then turned, ran back into the stairwell, sprinting up two more flights, emerging finally onto the last floor.

There were footsteps below her now and more coming up the stairs from the lobby. *You have to find a room and hide.* She ran through the corridor, trying doorknobs on both sides of the hall—locked, locked. She could hear the wolf running up the stairwell, growling. Locked. Locked. Shouting resounded in the lobby. Locked. Room 403 opened.

She stepped inside, shut the door, out of breath, on the verge of tears. It was completely dark in the room. She ran to the window, looked through it, light from the veranda glittering on the billions of snowflakes loading the fir trees with tons of powder, burying saplings, boulders, swirling madly as the wind blew drifts to the second floor.

She heard doors opening, shutting out in the corridor, the slams getting closer. A wardrobe stood to the left of the door. She set the gun on the bed, got behind the wardrobe, put all her weight against it, straining to shove the enormous piece of furniture across the floor. It inched. They were coming, just a few doors down now.

The wardrobe finally slid. She pushed it behind the door, then went to the desk, pulled it away from the window, braced it against the wardrobe.

Outside, someone said, “I can’t see through this peephole.”

“Unlock it.”

“It is unlocked.”

The door shook. “There’s something blocking it.”

Another man's voice came very quietly and very evenly through the barricade. "Can you hear me?" Devlin made no response. She picked up the gun. "Open the door right now." She didn't move. After a moment, the footsteps trailed away, and she stood trembling in the darkness of the bedroom, the only sound the whisper of snow striking the glass. Another minute passed. *Could they have left? Oh, please God, please.* She thought she heard the echo of footsteps, but the sound was soft and she couldn't be sure.

There was a knock, and his voice passed through the door.

"Gonna let me in, do this easy?"

Devlin looked at the wardrobe braced against the door, realized with a horrifying pressure between her eyes that this was it. End of the line.

"I will break it fucking down."

The knock was explosive this time. She thought he'd destroyed his hand, until the second and third and fourth blows came and the door began to splinter. She squeezed back the hammer, pulled the trigger twice, shot a pair of holes through the wardrobe and the door, the gun nearly jumping out of her hands. After her ears quit ringing, it was quiet, and she thought for a moment she'd hit him.

Soon he started up again. The wardrobe began to shudder, the ceiling rained plaster dust and paint chips, and the chandelier was tinkling. Her legs quaked so violently, they barely kept her upright. Tears streamed down her face.

As he broke through the back of the wardrobe, she backpedaled toward the closet.

Now she could hear him thrashing around inside. The wardrobe doors were flung open. He stood amid the old dresses, and she could see his face only by the faint illumination of the lantern that he held. The ax thudded blade-first onto the hardwood floor and he climbed out, set the lantern by the ax. He drove his shoulder into the side of the wardrobe and inched it back into the corner. The ravaged door stood exposed, wrenched from its hinges and leaning back against the door frame.

He picked up the flashlight and the ax and came toward her, the dome of his bald head shining with sweat in the firelight. She recognized his blue jeans and boots—Ethan, from breakfast this morning.

He stopped when he saw the revolver in her hand, the weapon twitching with each heartbeat. Devlin put both fingers on the hammer, pulled it back, squeezed the trigger. *Click.*

He lunged forward, slapped the gun out of her hand. As it slid across the floor, he pressed her up against the window, their hearts heaving into each other. She could feel the cold of the storm through the glass, the cold of the ax blade against her leg. He gazed down at her, their breath pluming in the lantern light. His smelled of wine.

Thunder resounded, porcelain figurines rattling on a nearby bureau.

He ground his teeth together. “He was my brother, and now he’s dead.”

“He was going to—”

“He was my brother. Now he’s dead.”

He let go of the ax and his fingers glided through her black curls, his fist closing on a handful of hair.

“That hurts,” she cried.

“You have no idea.” And he dragged her screaming toward the smashed door, which he kicked aside. She clung to his arm as he hauled her out into the corridor and past the rooms on the fourth floor, the wolf trotting alongside, snapping at her face. It was just the two of them now, the others gone, firelight glinting off the brass numbers.

405.

407.

409.

Devlin screamed, dug her fingernails into his arm. He shrieked and she tore herself away, ran back down the corridor. On the fifth stride, she tripped, fell, glanced back toward the lantern and the shape of Ethan and the wolf, fast approaching.

The moment she regained her footing, he was upon her.

FIFTY-ONE

When she opened her eyes again, the first thing she saw was the blurry image of her feet sliding across the stone floor of the lobby and past the hulking tower of the freestanding hearth, its blaze burned down to the embers, the only light coming from Ethan's lantern.

Devlin was being dragged by her hair. Her right eye throbbed and she could see only a slit of the world through it. The Texans who stood in their kimonos at the far end of the lobby resembled a collection of phantoms in the dark.

One of them yelled, "What you got there, Ethan?"

"Not your fucking concern!"

Ethan produced a knife from his pocket, grabbed her jacket, and sliced the blade through it, cleaving two layers of fabric—her fleece and the long underwear shirt. He ripped them off, then unbuttoned her jeans, slid them down her legs, and threw her to the floor. He tore off her pants, stripped away her long underwear bottoms, her panties, then set her back on her feet.

She stood dazed, embarrassed, and numb with shock as he shoved open the heavy iron doors to the storm.

"No, please, I'll—"

He pushed her outside, and she stumbled back into one of the pillars. Ethan lifted a long, thin whistle to his lips and blew, the frequency too high to register with her ears. Then the doors slammed shut, Ethan ramming home the three bolts on the other side.

Her feet ached. She looked down at them, but they were submerged in the snow the wind had blown against the pillar. She ran at the door and beat her fists against it and screamed. On a summer evening, her voice would've carried across the lake and up the mountain slopes. This night, the blizzard destroyed the echo and her voice went wherever the wind took it. She turned away from the doors, looked down toward the lake. She stamped her feet, snow continuing to fall onto the porch.

She turned back to the doors, put her lips to the snow-glazed iron: "It hurts. Please." She registered the desperation in her voice. It scared her like

nothing else had.

Devlin shut her eyes. *I'm going to die out here.* She ran out naked into the snow. It was waist-deep, numbing. She collapsed, sank into a drift. Above the chattering of her teeth there was only the hush of the storm, until a howl erupted across the lake.

She looked up, her head nodding with cold. The howl came again, closer this time. She struggled to her ice-burned feet. In the nearby woods, more howls answered. *Not the wolves, please God, not the wolves.*

Now she glimpsed something—a shape bounding through deep powder. There were tears and snowmelt in her eyes, and when she blinked them away, she saw the wolf. She looked back up the corridor of spruce leading to the lodge. The five-story tower, the projecting four-story north and south wings, stood black against the storm.

A series of explosions shattered the silence. She felt the vibration in her chest. Somewhere in the distance, an avalanche thundered down a mountainside.

An idea struck her—she envisioned climbing up to the veranda. She would break a window, slip into the library.

Now the wolf was coming toward her through the snow.

By the time she reached the end of the south wing, she was moaning from the pain. Her hair hung in her eyes and when she tried to brush it away, it broke off. To stay above the snow, she held on to the cold rock of the first level, making her way around the chimney to the back side of the south wing, coughing now in painful, choking fits.

Thirty yards from the veranda, her left foot stepped on something. She bent down, brushed away the snow. Screamed. A woman sat against the stone wall, naked, half-eaten. While new snow blanketed the dead girl's face, Devlin pushed on toward the veranda, swimming through snowdrifts as deep as she was tall.

Now the burning had begun to subside in her feet and hands, her extremities assuming a clumsiness that made it impossible to grip the stone wall. She looked down at the deadweight hanging at the ends of her arms, imagined the flesh and the bone and the blood freezing solid in her fingers, wondered if she'd already lost them.

The steps to the veranda were buried, the balustrade covered. She fought her way through the snow, her cheeks going numb, the dull intoxication of

hypothermia beginning to cloud her brain. From below she could see the French doors leading into the library, the glass panes fogged, firelight ricocheting off a wall of books.

Devlin heard something behind her, turned, saw three wolves emerge around the corner of the south wing, only their heads visible, rising and falling in the deepening snow.

She backed up to the foot of the stone steps, nothing to do now but watch them come, steel herself to die. She closed her eyes, felt the snow collecting on her face, her eyelids, the tip of her nose. Possessed by a strange, sudden warmth, she sensed the delusional euphoria lurking, and she welcomed it. Her lips moved in rhythm with her thoughts. She was thinking that she would have a little nap to gather her strength and when she woke she would climb out of the snow and go inside and sit by the fire.

But there was no great urgency. She could last the night if she had to. She could last until spring, until the thaw. She was finally comfortable and getting warmer by the minute.

Devlin heard the wolves coming now, tramping toward her through the snow, snarling, the sound of their great jaws snapping closed all around her like gunshots in the night.

What They Lost

FIFTY-TWO

Twenty minutes had passed since he'd thrown the teenager out into the storm, and in the dining room, the oblivious Texans were still playing Hold 'Em for foolish stakes, trashed beyond all reason.

He'd lived in this lodge and run its business going on ten years, with nothing approaching this level of catastrophe—Gerald dead, now Paul, and that woman, Kalyn, still unaccounted for, though Donald, that imminently capable sociopath, would surely find her before dawn, as he had so many others.

Ethan reclined in one of the brown leather chairs in the vicinity of the library's hearth, his legs stretched across the matching ottoman. He'd left his brother in his bedroom in that chair by the fireplace, Gerald in the south-wing alcove, where Kalyn had slit his throat. He'd deal with it all in the morning—the cleanup, public relations with the Texans, if they even remembered—and think of nothing more tonight but how monumentally fucked up he was about to get.

He filled his lungs with a hefty intake of smoke.

When it finally hit him, Ethan let the long bamboo pipe slip from his fingers and eased back into the chair, grinning stupidly at the ceiling, blowing smoke rings at the fire.

Through the opium fog, he heard a banging sound, thought for a moment it was his heart, since frequently, after a big hit, it raced and thumped in his chest like a blacksmith shaping out a piece of iron. But this wasn't that. He could feel his heartbeat, which was soft and slow; there was something comforting about its methodically steady pace.

He rarely hauled himself out of the chair on nights he smoked, preferring to pass out before the warmth of the fire, letting the twisting flames and the coals and the sounds they made occupy his mind.

It took considerable effort to maneuver out of the chair. At last, he did, looked down at his feet when finally standing, puzzled at the strange sensation, as if he was watching appendages that didn't belong to him. He certainly couldn't feel them, even as he walked onto the freezing stone of

the lobby, where Donald was already waiting in the vicinity of the door with his shotgun.

Ethan said, “Tenacious little thing, isn’t she? Give me that.” He swiped the shotgun out of Donald’s hand. “Wanna watch her go airborne?” he asked.

The guard chuckled as Ethan slid back the three iron bolts and pulled open the doors.

From Don’s perspective, it appeared as if the back of Ethan’s head exploded, his knees buckling, his body dropping like an inanimate sack of bones to the stone, a razor shard of Ethan’s skull lodged in Don’s eye.

A figure stood in the threshold, shadowy and formless in the candlelight. Don was backpedaling, reaching for the Glock in his jacket as a second muzzle flash blinded him, followed by a fragment of white-hot pain that was the end.

FIFTY-THREE

Will Innis, frostbitten, mauled, half-delirious with cold and exhaustion, limped through the open doors into the lodge, glancing down at the two men he'd shot, both undoubtedly gone, great pools of blood like black lacquer in the light of a nearby lantern.

Footsteps resonated through a passage at the other end of the lobby, and uncomfortable with the .45, the way it had seemed to spring out of his hand when he'd pulled the trigger, he traded it for the shotgun of the first man he'd killed.

Pumping it, he aimed down the passage as three shadows emerged into the lobby, silhouetted by candlelight.

One of them shouted, "Ethan, you having a little target practice without us?"

The first blast filled the lobby.

Will pumped again, fired again, the men running now, chased by two more thunderous booms that put everything quiet.

Will hurried across the lobby into the dimly lighted passage, glimpsed three men in kimonos on the floor, one sprawled and unmoving, two whimpering like puppies as they dragged themselves across the stone, leaving dark, sluglike trails in their wake.

Devlin lay on the porch in several inches of snow, shaking violently, naked. Will's eyes flooded at the sight of his daughter like this.

He lifted her out of the snow, carried her into the lodge, and as he pulled the doors closed and shot home the bolts, a wolf howled somewhere out in that snowy dark. He hadn't managed to kill any of them.

On the other side of the lobby, through an open door, what appeared to be fire shadows moved along the walls. Will carried Devlin past the free-standing fireplace into the library, where a fire raged in the hearth.

He placed his daughter down in the chair, stretched her legs across the ottoman, and pushed her close to the flames. In light of her disease, he couldn't bring himself to even consider what her time in the snow had exposed her body to. She'd be going straight to a hospital the moment they left this place.

Pulling a stack of blankets off a shelf above the hearth, he wrapped Devlin in them, her body still cold to the touch, shivering.

He knelt on the floor, ran his hand over her thawing hair.

"Dad's here," he said. "You're safe, baby girl."

Footsteps echoed in the lobby.

He turned, stood looking through the open door at darkness and candle flames. Unlacing his boots and slipping them off so they wouldn't squeak, Will hustled out of the library, softly shutting the door behind him.

He didn't hear the footsteps as he ran across the stone back toward the entrance, waited there, listening to the moan of wind pushing on the doors, his face burning with frostbite, his legs sore from yesterday's wolf bites.

Someone appeared in the passage beside the library—from his vantage point, just a silhouette-shaped black hole in the darkness. Will, who wasn't standing in the illumination of any lantern or candle, wondered if whoever it was could see him, then wondered if the person standing there had the same thought.

He pumped the shotgun, held at waist level, aimed at the opening of the passage. When he spoke, he tried to make his voice sound bigger, more unfazed than he felt.

"That lantern mounted to the staircase . . . walk into its light so I can see you. I'm holding a shotgun, I've just killed five men, and I won't hesitate to do the same to you."

The dark spot in the passage moved forward, entering the illumination of a lantern, firelight giving texture and depth to the troubled face of Kalyn Sharp.

She said, "Will?"

FIFTY-FOUR

Will lowered the shotgun and moved quickly across the lobby, feeling the cold of the stone through his socks. Drawing near, he let the shotgun drop to the floor.

They embraced, Will burying his face in the soft, warm side of her neck, just breathing her in. “You in one piece?” he whispered.

“Yeah. Where’s Devi?”

“In the library. They threw her out in the storm.”

“Oh God. Is she okay? She talking?”

“Not yet. She’s still unconscious.”

They came apart and Kalyn said, “What’s wrong with your face?”

Will touched the cut across his cheek, the blackened skin. “I had a run-in with some mean-ass wolves. Spent last night outside, all of today trying to find you and Devlin. Between the wolves and the cold, I’m in pretty rough shape.”

She glanced over her shoulder into the passage. “I see you took out a few of the guests.”

“Guests?”

“Don’t worry, they had it coming. But there’re three more of them, probably unarmed. They were playing cards in the dining room before you rolled in.”

“You okay? You seem—”

“No, I’m not okay. Look, Will, I have to—”

The library door opened. Devlin stood on the threshold, a blanket draped over her shoulders, hair hanging down in her face.

“Dad?”

Will smiled. “Hey, baby girl. How are—”

“Who’s that with you?”

“It’s all right. Just Kalyn.”

“No, it’s not all right.”

“Honey—”

“She was gonna leave us both here.”

Will looked at Kalyn, felt her beginning to pull away from him. He stared into her eyes, said, “What are you talking about, Devi?”

“Do you have a gun?”

“On the floor behind me.”

“Get it.”

“I think she’s confused from the cold,” Kalyn whispered. “Let’s go reassure her.” Kalyn started past him, moving toward the shotgun. Will grabbed her arm.

“Dad!”

“Where are you going?” Will asked. “Devlin’s over there.”

“You trust me or not, Will?”

He smiled weakly. “Of course. You take the gun. You’re better with it than I am.”

Kalyn smiled, said, “You gonna let go of my arm?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

“No, Dad.” Devlin was crying now.

“It’s all right, honey. I think you’re just a little confused.”

“I am *not* confused!” Will started toward his daughter, Kalyn toward the shotgun.

He suddenly spun around, saw Kalyn bending down, then lunged and shoved her across the floor.

As she fell hard on the stone, he picked up the shotgun.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“If I’m wrong,” Will said, “I apologize. Get up slowly, hands where I can see them.”

“Will, I can explain—”

“Maybe so. Maybe we’ll all have a big laugh about this in a little while. Walk toward the library. Devlin, we’re heading your way.”

Devlin stepped back into the library.

“Why don’t you trust me?” Kalyn asked.

“I’m not saying I don’t. We’re just gonna sort this out.”

They entered the library and Will closed the door behind them.

“She might have a gun or something, Dad.”

“Kalyn, sit in that corner and keep your hands on top of your knees.”

Devlin sat bundled in covers by the fire, glaring at Kalyn as she took a seat against the base of the bookshelves.

Will stood several feet away, the shotgun trained on Kalyn's chest.

"Devlin," he said, "tell me what's going on here."

"I've been in this lodge since early this morning, trying to keep from getting caught, looking for you. Then a little while ago, Kalyn found me. She took me upstairs. I thought we were sneaking out. Instead, she took me to this man named Paul. She was gonna trade me."

Kalyn said, "Will, please—"

"Shut up. Trade you for what, Devlin?"

"Her sister, Lucy. They keep women here."

"Why?"

"For the guests. So they can have sex with them, even kill them if they want."

"Where's Paul now? Was he one of the men I—"

"I shot him."

"Oh, honey."

"He was gonna hurt me. I didn't have a choice."

Will stared at Kalyn.

"You know me, Will."

"No, I know my daughter. You're a big fucking question mark right now." Will stepped toward her, raised the shotgun, trying to spurn the blood lust he felt. Not even with Javier had he wanted to hurt something this bad.

Kalyn's eyes ran over, and she wiped her face.

Will said, "Did you have this planned from the start?"

"No."

"To use us to help you get here, then trade my daughter for your sister? Was that the deal?"

"No, I just got caught. I never would've let them keep you or her. I would've—"

"I should kill you right now," Will said.

"Let's lock her up, Dad. In one of the rooms."

"Do we have a key?"

"I know where you can get one."

"All right, but meanwhile . . ."

He swung the Mossberg's composite stock into the side of Kalyn's head.

FIFTY-FIVE

Will and Devlin walked together out of the library, leaving Kalyn unconscious on the floor. They turned the corner into the candlelit passage, the three bodies lying up ahead, thankfully obscured in the low light.

“Why don’t you hang back, Dev,” Will said. “No sense taking in what you don’t have to.”

“Okay, Dad. I think each of the guests has a master key that opens all the rooms.”

“And the dining hall is up ahead on the left?”

“Yeah.”

“Yell if you need me.”

Will went on, stepping carefully between lakes of blood as he negotiated his way past the men he’d killed, marveling at the merciful numbness.

Three torches had been ignited in the great dining hall, the walls aglow and the far end of the table littered with cards, poker chips, wads of cash, wineglasses, shot glasses, highballs, martini glasses, cocktail shakers, bottles of wine, liquor, and two enormous bongs, all shimmering in the firelight.

“Anybody in here? I won’t hurt you if you come on out.”

He walked to the near end of the table, the room reeking of cigars and marijuana smoke, soured with spilled alcohol and the licorice stench of absinthe.

Ten feet away, he spotted a dark shape lying down against the wall beside a potted spruce tree. Will’s finger moved onto the trigger.

He heard the sputtering of a drunken snore, and his eyes pulled detail out of the dark: an older silver-haired man having partied out of his league.

Something clanged in the kitchen.

“Come out of there!” Will hollered. “Your chance to do this without getting hurt is slipping away.”

The kitchen doors swung open and two men staggered out—a man in his late twenties, naked except for his boxer shorts, looking disoriented and

sheepish, and a shorter, much rounder kimonoed man, balding and more sober.

"Tell him it's cool, Reynolds."

"Keep your mouth shut, Sean." To Will: "What's going on here?"

"Come closer."

The men stepped forward into the full illumination of a torch.

"Who are you?" Will asked.

"Guests of this lodge. Who the fuck are you?"

Footsteps sounded outside in the passage. Will glanced over his shoulder.

"Just me, Dad."

"I told you wait out there."

Reynolds said, "Where's everybody else?"

"They're dead, sir."

Sean said, "Oh shit."

"Are you law enforcement?" Reynolds asked.

"No."

Devlin sidled up to her father.

"Then what gives you the right to—" The racket of a pumping shotgun stopped him cold. Will turned, to see his daughter leveling a Mossberg on both men.

She said, "You with no shirt on, step out of the way, please."

Sean staggered around the table and sat down unsteadily against the wall beside his father. Reynolds looked confused and terribly put upon.

"Honey, what are you doing?" Will said.

She shouldered the shotgun.

"I'm gonna kill that fat man."

"No, Devlin—"

"Trust me, Dad, he has it coming."

"In cold blood?"

"Yep."

"Wait just a second."

"Why are you so angry with me?" Reynolds asked.

"Remember that pregnant woman you raped this morning?"

"I don't know what you're—"

"You told her you'd made eighty-four million dollars this year? That you could kill her if you wanted?"

“I think you’re mistaking me for—”

“I’m not mistaking you for anybody.”

Will said, “Devlin, this isn’t the way to handle this. You didn’t have a choice with Paul, but you do now.” He reached for the shotgun, saying, “Here, give me that,” but his voice was lost in the shattering report. Will watched, stunned, as his daughter struggled to pump the Mossberg again.

Reynolds was sitting on the floor in a puddle of himself, not making a peep, just staring at the shredded kimono and all that was leaking through it.

Devlin approached him with the Mossberg already shouldered, said, “I hope you go to hell,” and shot him in the face.

When her ears quit ringing, the only sound in the room was Sean’s whimpering.

Devlin looked back at her father, saw something like disappointment or disgust.

“Please don’t look at me like that, Dad.”

Will just shook his head, and for a moment Devlin thought he might cry.

“You wanna know why I’m never going to lose a wink of sleep over that?”

“Why?”

Devlin reached into her pocket and pulled out a key.

“Come with me. I’ll show you who I watched him rape.”

FIFTY-SIX

They locked Kalyn, Sean, and his father into separate rooms on the first floor of the south wing, and Will followed Devlin up the staircase to the fourth, where they stopped in front of the door to room 429.

“Here.” She handed her father the master key.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“Just open it.”

Will slipped the key into the lock.

“I’m gonna wait out here,” Devlin said. “You’ll need this.” She handed him a lantern, and Will turned the key, pushed the door open.

The room was dark. Someone lay crying in bed. He set the lantern on the table, assumed it was a woman under the covers, one of the captives.

Will said, “Everything’s okay now. The people who’ve kept you here and the man who hurt you today are dead.”

The covers turned back.

Will’s wife sat up, and he lost his breath.

“Rachael?”

Firelit tears trailed down her cheeks.

He had dreamed of this a thousand times—what it would be like to hold his wife again, to wrap his arms around her. None of them had approached the sweetness or the pain of this moment, and he was crying because of her smell. “You smell like you,” he whispered.

“Is this real?” Rachael asked.

“I promise it is.”

“Where’s Devlin?”

“Outside in the hallway.”

“Tell her to come in.”

Will called their daughter, and Devlin came, climbed into bed between them. They sat in the low light of room 429, huddled together under the covers, Devlin rubbing her mother’s round belly and doing most of the talking, answering an endless stream of questions about school, boyfriends,

her disease, their new life in Colorado, both parents in tears half the time, laughing the rest.

It had been over five years since they'd last been together. They talked and held one another and cried, all knowing in the back of their minds that they could sit on this bed for twenty years, for fifty, but it wouldn't matter. There would be no real catching up, no recovery of lost time, no understanding of the damage the separation had caused. They were different people now—haunted, ridden with scars and nightmares. There was no going back to that stormy July night in Ajo, Arizona. That Innis family was gone, and they would have to find themselves and one another again, start over, and pray that somehow the pieces fit back together.

Despite the joy and the overriding hope, it wasn't until this moment, sitting in this bed together on the fourth floor of this old lodge, that they each understood how much had been stolen from them, the incomprehensible arithmetic of what they had lost.

The Innises didn't sleep that night. They walked together up and down the corridors, looking for the rooms where the rest of the women were kept.

It was the most gut-wrenching, emotional two hours of Will's life, setting these prisoners free, telling them that the people who'd held them here and destroyed their lives were dead, incapable of ever hurting them again. Most of the women broke down, hysterical with relief. A handful had gone mad. One laughed at the news. One just sat on her bed and stared out the window, comatose. Kalyn's sister, Lucy Dahl, didn't say anything when they unlocked her door, just walked out without a word, and Will couldn't yet bring himself to broach the topic of her sister. In the north wing, they found two women emaciated from starvation, so weak that Will had to carry them down into the library, each weighing less than eighty pounds, their hair thinned, their teeth falling out. A woman on the third floor had died in her sleep at least a month ago, and after seeing her, Will stepped into the alcove and knelt down in a corner and wept. So much pain here, so much ruin.

FIFTY-SEVEN

They pushed all the furniture into the lobby and brought in mattresses and blankets from the nearest rooms. Twenty-two women, half of them pregnant, crowded into the library as Will added logs to the fire and stoked up the blaze, the room of books warming, the fire shadows moving in endless patterns across the walls as the blizzard shrieked and snow piled up against the French doors. A woman who'd given birth that morning sat in a corner nursing her infant, mother and child wrapped in blankets.

Will stood in the open doorway, looking across the library, wall-to-wall with mattresses. Some of the women were already sleeping, wrapped in each other's arms, others crying softly to themselves and rocking back and forth, as if not quite ready to give themselves over to this reality, afraid it would vanish from under their feet as it had so often before.

Will said, "Could I have your attention for a minute, please? My daughter and I are going to get some food from the kitchen, since we haven't eaten all day. Is anyone hungry?" No one spoke or raised a hand. "Tomorrow, if this storm has let up, a bush pilot is supposed to land on a nearby lake at three in the afternoon. I'm going to head out early and try to reach him, fly back to Fairbanks and get help. Try to find a big seaplane to fly to this inner lake. Hopefully, come tomorrow evening, you'll all be back in civilization, with your families en route."

A half hour later, Devlin sat on the hearth before the fire, eating beef stew and buttered biscuits.

When she finished her late supper, she crawled under the covers next to her mother. She could feel the warmth of the fire through the blanket, the room dark, quiet, filled with the respirations of women sleeping, the crack and hiss of the flames devouring the wood, a slumber party like Devlin could never have imagined. She was asleep within a minute.

Rachael lay on her side, facing her husband, his face awash in firelight. She thought for sure he'd aged more than five years, his features harder, leaner, not a hint of the baby fat that had once smoothed his jawline, given him those boyish good looks she'd fallen for in college. She even thought she saw strands of silver.

Will opened his eyes. Rachael smiled.

"Are you warm?" he whispered. She nodded, the child in her belly active. She wanted to take Will's hand, let him feel the tiny thrusts of the baby's knees and elbow. "You've got that deep-thinking look on your face," he said.

"It's going to be difficult."

"What?"

"Reintegrating, coming together again. I'm not sure how I'll make it on the outside. I feel like I'm being released after a twenty-year prison sentence. Like I won't know what to do with myself. How to be a mother again. A wife."

"We'll make it work, Rachael."

"You say that, but . . . you don't realize—"

"I don't care how hard it is."

"You say that now."

"I mean it now. I'll mean it later."

"I want you to feel something." She took his wrist and pressed the palm of his hand against the side of her stomach.

"Kicking," Will said.

"Yeah. It's his busy time. Usually wakes me up doing this in the middle of the night."

"You know it's a he?"

"Not for certain, but I've gotten good at telling. Feels like boy energy."

"How many have you had since you've been here?"

"This is my fourth."

"What happened to the others?"

"They sold them."

"Jesus. How far along are you?"

“Six and a half months. I’m going to keep him.”

“Why would you—”

“I’ve had three of my babies taken away from me—a week after birth. I think they must sell them. I tried not to get attached, fought it. But it didn’t matter. They didn’t know what they came from. All they knew was that I was their mother, and I loved every one of them, and I still do. I want to keep this one. Raise him. Might be the only good thing about any of this. I know this is difficult for you. I’ve been damaged beyond repair in your eyes.”

“I don’t feel that way, Rach.”

“Well, if you do—”

“I don’t.”

“*If* you do . . . just understand that I don’t expect you to do something you aren’t capable of. You know, this almost would’ve been easier if you’d met someone, remarried. At least you wouldn’t have a choice then.”

Will put his hands on Rachael’s face. “You’re still my wife. Devlin’s mother. I have no illusions about how hard it’s gonna be. But we are going to try. I want to.”

“How do you feel about keeping this baby?”

“Puts my stomach in knots, but maybe that’ll change. You can help me. Look, you were a psychologist, so keep in mind all you’ve been through. You’re in no shape to try to think about your life when you leave this place. Just try to stay in the moment for now. I am.”

“Why didn’t you remarry?”

“Because I’m in love with you.”

“You didn’t meet anyone who—”

“I never opened myself up to it.”

“Why?”

“Because I still loved my wife. Even when I thought you were dead.” He reached out and wiped her face, touched the tiny white scar under her bottom lip that he used to kiss religiously. “Now close your eyes and think only about the fact that you’re lying between your husband and daughter. We both love you, and you’re safe. That’s it. Now sleep.”

FIFTY-EIGHT

The sunlight passed clear and sharp through the glass panes of the library windows.

A perfect silence. No wind. No snow driving against the doors.

Devlin sat up and pushed off the covers, squinting in the brilliant light. Her father was already up. Her mother, too. She rubbed her eyes and yawned and went to find them.

They were standing at the entrance to the lodge, holding steaming mugs of coffee, the doors pulled open, surface hoarfrost glittering outside under the midmorning sun, several feet of snow piled up on the porch. The lake water was still and deep green, rimmed with a layer of thin ice that smoked beneath the sun. The bodies of Ethan and the guards had been dragged away, their blood frozen on the stone. Rachael and Will turned as Devlin approached.

“Morning, honey,” her mother said. Devlin stood between them, noticed for the first time that she was a few inches taller than her mother. “So how long will you be gone?” Rachael was asking.

“Hope to be back tonight,” Will said, “but if we don’t reach Fairbanks until after dark, I don’t know. Can you keep things under control if we don’t come back until tomorrow?”

“Yeah. But I worry about you going out there with the wolves loose.”

“I’ll have the shotgun, plenty of shells.”

“You have to take Devlin?”

“Yeah, Buck and I will fly back here to the inner lake and pick her up. I want to get her into a hospital tonight. I worry all this is going to get her sick.”

. . .

In a supply room, four doors down from where Paul sat dead in a chair beside a cold fireplace, Will found snowshoes, a parka, and an extra box of twelve-gauge buckshot.

He ate an early lunch of beef stew, and Will said good-bye to the women in the library, explained that he would try to return that evening, but if it wasn't possible, first thing tomorrow morning at the latest.

Rachael and Devlin walked Will to the front door, where he cinched the straps of his snowshoes down across the tops of his boots.

Rachael hugged her husband.

"I'll see you soon," she said, and watched him step outside and climb up onto the snowpack.

She stood in the warm, direct sun, watching Will go, his snowshoes sinking into a foot and a half of powder with every step, her eyes burning from the harsh reflection off the ice crystals.

Seconds before retreating back into the lodge, she and Devlin registered a distant droning, which grew exponentially louder with every passing second, until a floatplane buzzed the lodge's roof, its engine screaming as it descended toward the water, the pontoons catching sun, glimmering like mirrors.

Her heart leaped as the plane touched down midway across the lake, Will stopping just fifty yards out from the lodge—he wouldn't have to make the long haul to the outer lake.

The engine had cut off. Devlin was squinting, trying to make out the details of the plane, though it had almost reached the far end of the lake, more than a mile away.

Her smile faded.

Will had turned around, tracking back toward the lodge as fast as his snowshoes allowed.

Something was wrong. Will was wearing that same worried expression he used to get just prior to opening arguments for a big trial.

He reached them breathless and sweating.

"What's wrong?" Rachael asked.

Will leaned over with his hands on his knees, drawing in lungfuls of cold air.

He shook his head, gasping between ragged breaths. "That isn't our plane."

The Lesser of the Evils

FIFTY-NINE

From the porch, Will and Rachael had an unobstructed view of the entire lake, the floatplane clearly visible at the far end—a piece of red amid all that blinding white.

Will lifted the binoculars to his face as sunlight and frigid air streamed in, adjusting the knobs, bringing the plane into focus.

“Okay, here we go. There are one . . . two, three . . . people standing in a foot of water, unloading the cargo pod, throwing duffel bags up onto the bank. They’re all wearing big white parkas, definitely dressed for the weather.”

“Hunters?” Rachael asked.

“They don’t look like hunters.” He drew in a quick shot of air.

“What?”

Will noted the sudden pressure in his chest, behind his eyes, strength flooding out of his legs as approaching footsteps echoed in the lobby.

“What?”

“I recognize one of them,” he said.

“Who?”

“Oh God.”

“Will? Who?”

He lowered the binoculars and stared at his wife. “Javier Estrada just climbed down out of the pilot’s seat.”

“That man you and Kalyn—”

“Yeah.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“What do you think? We took his family, left them for days in a burned-out mall.”

Devlin walked up, stopped between her parents, said, “So did you find out who they are?”

“Bad men,” Rachael said. “Very bad men.”

Will put his arm around Devlin, kissed the top of her head. “Who is it, Dad?”

“Javier. But we’re gonna be all right, honey,” he said, wondering if the words rang as hollow for Devlin as they felt tumbling out of his mouth. “I need to talk to Mom. Stay here for a minute, okay?” He handed her the binoculars. “Keep an eye on that plane at the end of the lake, and the four men who just climbed out of it.”

“No, Will. No fucking way. Absolutely not.”

Will and Rachael stood in the corridor, twenty feet down from Kalyn’s room.

“Rachael, we can’t do this on our own.”

“She betrayed you. Tried to trade our *daughter.*”

“I know, but we need her, and we’re running out of time standing here fighting about it.”

Rachael flashed her eyes at the ceiling, her most vehement eye roll.

“Wow, five years since I’ve seen that one,” Will said.

She smiled. “Missed it, huh?”

“I need you to trust me. As bad as Kalyn is and what she did, the man who’s coming here is ten times worse. We’re going to need her.”

“The lesser of the evils. That’s where we’re at?”

“Afraid so.”

Will looked through the peephole, saw Kalyn under the covers, asleep in bed.

“All right.”

Rachael slipped the master key into the lock. It turned, and Will nudged the door open with the barrel of the shotgun.

Kalyn sat up, her face swollen from a night of steady crying.

“We’re in trouble,” Will said.

Kalyn stared back, eyes darkened with shame. “I wanna see my sister. Is she okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. A plane has landed on the inner lake.” He hesitated, as if by not speaking his name, it might undercut the reality that the man had actually, impossibly, found them, that he was here, less than a mile away. “Javier and three men.”

Kalyn’s face paled, the shame deferring to a crisp alertness, tinged with fear.

“Where are they now? Right out front?”

“No, far end of the lake.”

“And you’re sure it’s him?”

“I took a pair of binoculars from the supply room. There’s no question.”

“Who are the other men?”

“I don’t know. One is Hispanic, maybe another Alpha. Other two are white.”

“Well, we know why they’re here—for what we did to Javier’s family, to him, possibly those men I killed in Fairbanks three days ago.” She threw back the blankets.

“The Alaskan mob?”

“They’re probably cocounsel with the Alphas on this.”

“Aren’t you really the one they—”

“Oh sure. Walk out and explain the situation to them, Will. I dragged you into this. It’s all my fault. I bet they give you a pass, probably even fly you and your family out of here before the shit starts to fly.”

SIXTY

Rachael, Will, and Devlin were following Kalyn down the first-floor corridor.

“All right,” she said. “So here’s how I see it. What do they want?”

“To kill us.”

“No, you’re rushing ahead. Think of a more concrete motivation.”

“I don’t know.”

“First, they want to get inside this lodge. We want to keep them out, or at least know if they make it in and be ready to deal with that.”

“Okay.”

“So we start thinking about all the points of entry.”

“How many are there?”

“Right now? Probably more than forty.”

“How’s that possible?”

Kalyn stopped, opened the door of room 111, pointed to the window. “First priority is locking every room on every corridor.” She knocked on the wood. “These doors are thick, and the locks look damn near indestructible. That’s not to say they won’t be able to get through, but they’ll make a hell of a lot of noise doing it. You have a master key, Will?”

“Yes.”

“Give it to Devlin, let her go and do that right now.”

“I don’t feel comfortable with her running around by her—”

“I think we have some time to work with here.”

Will pulled one of the master keys out of his pocket, handed it to his daughter. “Go,” he said. “Be careful, and remember to check every door after you lock it.”

As Devlin took off back toward the lobby, they reached the alcove.

“Here’s our first trouble spot,” Kalyn said. “I’ll bet they try to come in through a window either here or at the north-wing alcove. Or both. We should station someone, maybe even two people, a little ways back in the corridor with shotguns.”

“Who? There’s just me, Rachael, and—”

“We’ll need help from Sean and Ken, maybe even some of the women. Come on.”

They jogged back down the corridor, emerging finally into the lobby.

Kalyn pointed to the entrance.

“I’m not terribly worried about those doors. We’ll lock them, but no one storms the castle through the front door. With those iron bolts, they’d literally need to blow it off the hinges. I’m not sure they’re going to announce their presence like that, since they won’t know what they’re facing.”

She led them through the passage, past the dining hall, to a door that opened onto the veranda. “We’ll need someone here.”

They backtracked into the lobby, now approaching the library.

Devlin was already to the end of the first floor of the south wing. Will could hear the doors slamming, locks turning.

They entered the library.

“No one can be in here, since they could pick us off through the windows. We’ll station someone in the lobby to watch this door and the front entrance and back up the corridors.” She opened the small door to the right of the fireplace. “This would be another great point of entry.”

They started down the spiral staircase, their footfalls echoing on the metal, causing it to vibrate, Will gliding his hand along the railing.

“Move very slowly,” he said.

“I’m not going anywhere, Will. Don’t know if you’ve realized, but we need each other.”

They reached the floor of the cellar. Peering just ahead, Will could see a door outlined by seams of light where the sun passed between the cracks.

Kalyn opened it. Light poured in. He saw the empty cages.

“They won’t all enter the same way, but this is where I’d come in.”

Kalyn’s eyes fell upon something that made her smile.

She approached a wall adorned with ancient tools—saddles, scythes, machetes. Kalyn tapped one of two enormous bear traps.

“This thing’s made to catch grizzlies,” she said. “Break a man’s leg like it was nothing.”

“You think they still work? Looks pretty rusted out to me.”

“We’ll see. Come on, let’s head back up. I want to take a look through the binoculars.”

SIXTY-ONE

I don’t see them,” she said. “It’s just the plane.”

Kalyn stepped back inside, and Rachael shut the doors and locked them.

“How much time you think we have?” Will asked. “That’s deep snow. Might take them what? An hour? Hour and a half to get here? And we’ve burned thirty minutes already.”

Kalyn shook her head. “I actually think we’ve got time on our side. They flew right over the lodge, ballsy fuckers, set down in plain site, so they have to realize we’re aware of them. For all they know, we’ve got a small army in this lodge.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m fairly certain they won’t make their move until dark.”

Rachael said, “I felt better when I thought this was going to happen in daylight.”

“No, it’s good. Gives us time to prepare. We should meet with Sean and Ken and the women, tell them the good news, sign up a few recruits. But I’d like a moment with my sister first. I only saw her through a peephole yesterday. I don’t even think she knows I’m here.”

“She doesn’t,” Will said.

“Well?”

“You really think we have time for a family reunion?”

“Please, Will.”

“Five minutes.”

Will unlocked the door and walked inside, caught him rising out of bed, puffy-eyed from dehydration and looking very afraid.

“Sit down, Sean.”

Sean complied as Will closed the door and dragged a chair away from the desk. He sat facing the young man, the shotgun lying across his lap.

“Are you going to kill me?” Sean asked.

Will shook his head. “My daughter overheard a conversation between you and your father yesterday morning. You know what I’m talking about?”

Sean stared at his bare feet for a moment. “You mean in the library? After breakfast?”

Will nodded. “You didn’t want to be here, did you, Sean?”

“I didn’t know what this lodge was. I swear to you.”

“Did your father?”

“No. I mean, he’d heard it was a wild place, but we didn’t have any idea. Would you have believed it without seeing it?”

“My wife has been here for five years.”

“I’m sorry, man. Really.”

“I need to know something.”

“What?”

Will locked his gaze on Sean.

“Did you help yourself to any of the women here?”

“No.”

“You can tell me the truth.”

“I swear to you. This place makes me sick.”

“Then what did you do yesterday?”

“I stayed in my room.”

“All day?”

“Until dinner.”

“What about your father?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think he would have hurt anyone. That’s not like him.”

Will stood. “Did you grow up with firearms around the house?”

“My dad and I go elk hunting in Montana every fall.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?”

Will walked to the door, pulled it open, cold air from the corridor sweeping in.

“Let’s go talk to your father. I’ve got some bad news.”

Lucy Dahl sat in a chair by a fireplace in one of the guest rooms, a book in her lap, her legs propped on a footstool, basking in the heat.

Kalyn closed the door and moved quietly across the room toward her sister, no sound but the shift of smoldering logs and the paper scrape as Lucy turned the pages of her book.

It had been three years since Kalyn had laid eyes on her sister, and their last words had been angry ones, a stupid fight that Kalyn had started—big sis telling little sis what was best for her life.

Two steps from the chair, Kalyn's eyes welled up. She couldn't see Lucy look up from her book through the lens of salt water shivering on the surface of her eyes.

"Kalyn? Oh my God."

They sat on the floor by the fire, Lucy crying, Kalyn whispering, "I'm here, honey. I'm here." Wanting to tell her she was safe now, that they had a plane waiting on the lake to take her home, back to her husband, away from this nightmare.

Lucy must have sensed her holding back, because she said, "What's wrong, K? What is it?"

Kalyn shook her head, footsteps entering the boondocks of her perception, Will already coming back, the five minutes gone faster than it seemed possible.

"We're together," she said. "Just that we aren't home yet."

Will stood in front of the hearth in what had been Ethan's room, facing twenty-two women (most of whom watched him with the desperate blankness of refugees) and Sean and Ken (still massively hungover from the previous night and looking more than a little uncertain about their demoted stations under the new management).

"As Rachael mentioned to you all, four men have landed on the inner lake. While Kalyn and I are the primary targets, you're all in danger here, and we have to prepare. Kalyn and I can't defend everyone on our own, and I know you've been through so much hell, and I'm sorry we have to deal with this, but we need your help. Sean and Ken have come on board, along with Kalyn's sister, but we need one more volunteer."

The women glanced at one another. A few began to cry.

It was thirty seconds before a hand went up—raised by a dark-haired woman who appeared to be in the first trimester of her pregnancy.

Will said, “Yeah? What’s your name?”

“Suzanne Tyrpak. I’ll fight. I’ve never even touched a gun before, but if you show me how, I’ll do it. I mean, if this is what we gotta do to get back to our families.”

There were no other volunteers, the rest too weak or pregnant or broken, some still whispering to themselves—incoherent, devastated babblings.

He looked at Kalyn. “That makes eight of us. Can we pull this off?”

. . .

“The beautiful thing about a twelve-gauge,” Kalyn said, “is you can be a terrible shot, and it doesn’t matter.” They all stood outside the supply room—the Innises, Kalyn, her sister, Suzanne Tyrpak, and the oilmen—shouldering pump-action Mossbergs.

Kalyn said, “I think these guys may come wearing bulletproof vests, which is why I want you to aim either below the waist or at the head. You have to pump it after every shot.” She pumped her shotgun. “The kick is strong, so remember to lean into it.”

“Is it loud?” Suzanne asked. “When you pull the trigger?”

“Loud as hell. All right, let me show you how to load.”

It took both Kalyn and Will to pull the grizzly traps off the wall, the monstrous contraptions weighing in at forty-eight pounds of rusted cast iron apiece, with jaw spreads of seventeen inches. Will stepped on the release, and they strained to force the jaws open.

Although barely legible, *American Fur and Trade Company, HBC No. 6* had been engraved into the iron of the pan. When Kalyn popped it with one of the pitchforks, the snare jumped, the giant teeth chomping together, snapping the wooden handle in two.

The sun hung low in the sky, sitting just over the horizon at the end of the lake, turning clouds and snow pink, the water scarlet. Devlin watched from a window on the third floor, thought it was the most striking end of day she'd ever seen, the sky at war with itself.

Kalyn stood at the window in Rachael's old room on the fourth floor, glassing what she could see of the surrounding grounds and forest behind the lodge.

"Light's getting bad," she said. "I thought maybe I'd see tracks or something."

"You think they're out in the woods somewhere?" Will asked.

"I would imagine, but the trees are too loaded with snow to see that far into them."

"What if we went ahead and cut the power? Might give us an advantage, since we know the lodge better than they do."

"Not if they have night-vision goggles. One of the things the Alphas are known for is using state-of-the-art equipment. I mean, we might as well have a Force Recon team coming after us." She lowered the binoculars. "What's my role from here on out? I've helped you prepare. Will you trust me? Let me fight when the time comes?"

"You mean am I going to give you a gun?"

"Will, no one here is as proficient as—"

"I understand that, but what you need to know is that part of me is more afraid of you than of what's coming."

"Will, you don't under—"

"I understand plenty. Come on. Let's go check the other side."

Will found Rachael and Devlin eating leftovers with the others in the kitchen.

He asked them to walk with him, and they followed, going back up the passage, then out into the lobby, where he finally pulled them into the library and shut the door.

"Come here, guys."

The Innises sat down in a corner by the French doors, protected from the view of anyone who might be watching from outside.

Above the skyline of firs, evening faded from pink into purple.

“It’s gonna be dark soon,” Will said, and already he could feel the sadness rising in his throat. He looked at his long-lost wife. His teenage daughter. “It’s gonna be a long, long night, and the truth is, we don’t know what’s going to happen. If we’re gonna be together in the morning. Or if this is the last . . .” He ground his molars together, fighting the surge of emotion. *Be strong for them.* He reached out, touched his daughter’s face. “I’m so proud of you, Devlin. The courage, the nerve you’ve shown.”

“But I’m afraid, Dad.”

“I know. We all are, and that’s okay. What matters is how you handle it. That you don’t let it handle you.” They all embraced, held on to one another for nearly a minute.

When they came apart, Will grabbed Rachael’s hands. “I want you to see the little farmhouse we have in Colorado. There are mountains, aspen trees. There’s a river nearby, and sometimes you can hear it from our bedroom. I want to be there with you and Devi and this little guy.” He touched Rachael’s rounded belly. “I’m gonna do everything I can tonight to make that possible. You both know what you have to do?” His girls nodded. “No matter what happens, I love you, Rachael. I love you, Devlin.” Rachael was crying, Devlin’s chin quivering. “All right,” Will said. “I guess it’s time.”

SIXTY-TWO

Ethan’s old room was already stocked with food and water and plenty of blankets, since they couldn’t risk the light or smell of a fire. Will and Kalyn had set the weakest women on the mattress and swaddled them in covers, left Devlin in charge of protecting the women who couldn’t fight.

“This is your room now, Devi,” her father said, “and these women are your responsibility. You kill anyone who comes through that door to hurt you.”

“I will.”

“There’re two more shotguns, fully loaded, and three boxes of shells on the bedside table. I don’t care what you hear out there, stay put.”

“Yes, sir.”

Through the glass, the sky deepened from purple to navy.

“Keep them quiet, away from the windows, and use no light.” Will tapped the walkie-talkie in the pocket of her parka. “Emergencies only. You remember the channel?”

Outside in the corridor, Will closed and locked the door. He looked at Kalyn, said, “Come with me,” and led her down to the supply room, which he unlocked. “Go on, pick out whatever you think you’ll need.”

Kalyn stepped inside, pulled a shotgun from one of the glass cases, then broke open a box of shells. She loaded it and crammed the pockets of her fleece jacket with as many shells of buckshot as they would hold. Then she opened a drawer, took out a Browning 9-mm.

“Will?” she said while loading a magazine with hollow-point rounds.

“What?”

“Thank you for not telling my sister about what I—”

“It’s not the time to deal with that.”

Kalyn lifted the shotgun strap over her head, slammed a magazine into the Browning.

Suzanne and Lucy sat side by side near the end of the south-wing corridor, twenty feet back from the alcove, the shotguns lying across their laps.

It was perfectly silent—just the steady pulse of their heartbeats and the humming of a ceiling lamp above their heads.

Sean and Ken waited twenty feet back in the passage, their shotguns trained on the thick wooden door that led to the veranda.

Their only light was a lantern mounted on the passage wall.

“Dad?” Sean said.

“Yeah.”

“We’re in trouble here.”

Ken glanced at his son in the lantern light. “Your old man’s working on something.”

“What?”

“A way to get us out of this.”

Kalyn sat on the stone of the freestanding hearth. With a quick turn of her head, she could keep an eye on either the front entrance or the library door, now closed and locked. She could also look down the first-floor corridor of both wings, see Suzanne and Lucy camped near the end of the south, Will walking toward the end of the north. She kept replaying the afternoon and evening and all the preparations they’d made, haunted with the fear she’d overlooked something.

Will approached the end of the corridor, spotted Rachael twenty feet back from the north-wing alcove, out of sight from the east- and west-facing

windows. He eased down beside her, set the shotgun on the floor. She glanced over, tried to smile.

“It’s just not fair,” she whispered, “to get you and Devi back, only to have to go through this.”

“I know, but we haven’t experienced much fairness in the last five years, have we?”

She shook her head. “How do you think Devi’s handling this?”

“She’s scared but dealing. Our daughter is an amazing human being, Rachael.”

“She is, isn’t she? Felt so good just to be able to give her therapy this morning.”

They were quiet for a while, sat there holding the shotguns, listening.

On his way to Rachael and their post, Will had stopped in one of the rooms to look out the window. He’d seen a starry, windless night, the lake serene, a model of absolute stillness.

Nearby, wood creaked. Rachael looked at Will, but he shook his head, whispered, “An old place like this makes all kinds of noise. Probably just wood settling.”

“I’m glad we have these gloves. It’s freezing in here.”

They waited, evening assenting tonight.

An hour slipped by, then two.

“My legs are cramping,” Rachael whispered. “I’m gonna stretch them, just to the lobby and back.”

As his wife walked away, Will took out his radio, asked for everyone to check in.

When Kalyn’s voice came over the channel, she said, “You probably just heard the front doors close.”

“No, I didn’t actually. What’s going on?”

“I stepped outside with Ethan’s whistle, called in the wolves. Figured maybe if they find our bad guys, we’ll hear them, get a sense of where they are.”

“Good deal.”

The radio went quiet.

Rachael returned. She leaned against Will and closed her eyes for a little while, then let him do the same.

Two minutes shy of midnight, Will glanced over his shoulder, saw Kalyn right where she'd been all night, sitting on the base of the freestanding hearth.

"I'm gonna go talk to her," Will said.

"Why?"

"Something's not right. I mean, why haven't they come yet?"

"I don't know."

Will sighed. "You'll be all right on your own for a minute?"

"I'll be fine."

He struggled up, legs sore, feet numb from two hours of sitting in one spot, immobile. "If you see anything, hear anything strange, radio me immediately."

Will started down the corridor toward the lobby, and it had just crossed his mind that maybe Javier and his men weren't coming tonight after all, that maybe they'd decided to let them sit it out until morning, until everyone was nerve-frayed and psychotic with exhaustion. Just then, the lodge rumbled and all the lights winked out.

Flashbang

SIXTY-THREE

Will froze in his tracks, Suzanne's voice squeaking over the radio in his pocket. "What just happened?"

Kalyn responded, her voice a whisper: "They cut the power. This means they're close, wearing night-vision goggles, and getting ready to make their move. I know it's pitch-black at the end of those corridors, but your eyes will adjust, so everyone stay calm. You all have flashlights, and if you shine the beam in their eyes, you'll screw up their vision for a minute or two. Now I don't want anyone using the radio again until you've made visual contact."

Will could see the lobby just ahead, lantern light flickering across the wall and the floor. He thought he heard Kalyn whispering, wondered if she was sending up prayers against whatever was coming.

Will turned around, jogged back toward the alcove, practically tripped over Rachael in the darkness.

"Just me, honey."

"I can't see a thing, Will."

"Get your flashlight out."

"I'm already holding it. Should I turn it on?"

"No, but be ready when I say. I'll handle the shotgun. You be my light source." Will found his radio, just a red dot in the darkness. He pressed TALK. "Suzanne and Lucy? Copy?"

Suzanne's voice came back: "Yeah?"

"Don't turn it on yet, but one of you operate the flashlight while the other mans the shotgun. Better than each of you fumbling with two pieces of equipment at once."

The radio went quiet, and Rachael and Will stared at the alcove, waiting for their eyes to adjust, to begin picking out form and shape in the darkness, but they never did.

SIXTY-FOUR

Roddy hated Fidel and Javier. They'd controlled every aspect of this job. Told him where to go, how to go, talked down at him like he didn't know what the fuck he was doing out here in the bush in his own state. This wasn't Mexico or the Arizona borderlands. This was his block, and he resented being treated as a foot solider under their command.

Of course, he didn't utter a word of that dissatisfaction. Didn't venture an eye roll, display a single millisecond of outward frustration. He and Jonas had agreed: They want to run the show? Fine. Because what outranked Roddy's frustration with Fidel and Javier was his fear. You did not fuck with Alphas. They were mythic. Doing business with them, regardless of how lucrative, entailed severe risk, since the possibility existed that things wouldn't work out, that you might insult them or be perceived as trying to take advantage.

He thought it strange—the Alphas were here on principle, didn't give a shit about the money, the women, said Stoke could have whatever they found. They'd spent tens of thousands to come up here just to deal with that ex-FBI agent. Stoke had warned Jonas and the boys not to upset them, said flat out. "You piss them off, *your* problem. I'm not getting involved. Certainly not intervening on behalf of your ass. You're their bitches, so grab ankle, grit teeth, and pray you come back."

At least the Alphas had brought some killer toys and been nice enough to share. And despite his inner griping, he had to admit that they certainly seemed to know what they were doing. Roddy felt like a fucking SEAL on some badass spec ops gig.

So here he stood, freezing his ass off in waist-deep snow, waiting for the signal, acknowledging the irony that what scared him more than anything was that he might accidentally kill the ex-FBI agent or Mr. Innis. They'd been cautioned several times against making that mistake, which meant that on top of everything else, he had to worry about who wound up in his sights.

A wolf howled. With the moon rising over the Wolverines and that milky smear of stars, it was almost too bright for night-vision goggles. But Roddy went ahead and slipped them on, figured the signal would be coming soon, and from what they'd seen, it would be total darkness inside the lodge.

Kalyn was up now, moving in slow circles around the freestanding hearth. She kept debating whether to start with the Browning or the twelve-gauge, decided finally on the 9-mm, since the shotgun felt cumbersome hanging from the strap around her shoulders. She slipped it off, set it on the stone in front of the dormant fireplace.

Wolves were howling outside, on their way back to the lodge.

From where Fidel stood, the view was spectacular—the black lake and the hills and a moon edging up on the horizon. Nothing like Sonora or the industrialized desert waste of Phoenix.

His parka and snow gear lay in a pile nearby.

He crossed himself and waited for the signal.

The snow was deep on the veranda, almost to the man's waist. The large wooden door stood thirty feet from where he squatted by the railing, protected from the snow by a steep overhanging eave.

Javier reached into his pocket and sent the signal, then pulled out the walkie-talkie. He pressed TALK, said, "Get ready."

The deep anticipatory tingling in the pit of his stomach was spreading like wetness across a napkin. He'd mapped everything out, nailed it down so cold, he had but to execute the movements, the choreography. He felt like a ballerina in that regard, waiting backstage before the curtains opened.

Devlin sat on the floor in Ethan’s room. She was cold.

In the opposite corner, the newborn cooed.

The head of a woman named Theresa rested in her lap, and Devlin stroked her hair and whispered into her ear that everything would be all right.

. . .

A shaft of moonlight passed through the west-facing window of the south-wing alcove. It illuminated the floor, the walls in lunar light. A wolf howled, much closer now, and received no answer.

Lucy’s walkie-talkie coughed up a loogie of static, Kalyn’s voice squeaking through the speaker, “Lucy, come see me for a second.”

“Be right there, K.”

Will reached out, located Rachael’s hand in the darkness, squeezed.

Lucy walked quickly down the corridor, the vast darkness of the lobby looming just ahead. The shotgun she carried in her left hand was so heavy, and she couldn’t imagine actually firing it at someone, the bruising recoil, the earshattering report, the killing.

Ten feet from the lobby, she spotted something out of the left corner of her eye. She stopped, staring at the door to 114. It was wide open, which shouldn’t have been the case, considering they’d locked every room on every floor that afternoon.

Lucy hurried on.

Three steps from the lobby, her legs melted.

She hit the floor, head pounding and consciousness fading as someone dragged her back into 114.

SIXTY-FIVE

The pager in Roddy's pocket vibrated. He inhaled the spike of adrenaline, moving now toward the east-facing window at the end of the north wing, wading through the snow. He reached the window's base, took a moment to calm himself and rack the slide on his suppressed Beretta 93R, slipped his finger into the trigger guard.

He peeked over the windowsill, peered through the glass, the night-vision world green and grainier than a B horror movie. He spotted a man sitting against the wall, not ten feet away, at the opening to a stairwell, with what appeared to be a shotgun across his lap. Roddy ducked down, listened. No sound of movement. He hadn't been seen.

Three, two, one. This time, he stood upright, the detachable stock pressed tight against his shoulder, squeezed the trigger twice, half a dozen 9-mm rounds piercing the glass.

The man with the shotgun shook like the epicenter of a tiny earthquake, his body riddled with bullets, and fell over. He hadn't made a sound. Only the shatter of glass could have compromised Roddy's presence, and he didn't think it had been that loud.

Never saw that coming, did you, my man? I'd have made a helluva Special Forces solider. It's gonna be so much fun to talk about all this with Jonas and the boys. After *the Alphas are gone.* He pictured them having beers, laughing in Stoke's poolroom at the Fairbanks warehouse, each taking turns telling everyone how they'd stormed this lodge like it was fucking Normandy.

Kalyn's walkie-talkie chirped.

Suzanne's voice: "Kalyn, you there?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Where's Lucy?"

"She's not with you?"

“No.”

“She left the lobby at least a minute ago, heading back your way.”

“Well, she isn’t here,” Suzanne replied, in tears now, “and I don’t hear her coming.”

“Just sit tight. I’ll find her.”

Kalyn slipped her radio into her pocket and stared down at her sister, who lay unconscious on the floor. “Sorry, Luce,” she whispered, “but I didn’t come all this way to see you killed.”

All right, buddy, time to focus. Roddy played the move several times in his head. *Stand quickly. Both hands on the windowsill. Leap through. Roll twice across the floor and sight up the corridor while lying on your stomach. Extra clips in your pocket. Use controlled bursts. Don’t freak out, and remember to breathe. Three, two, one.*

He came to his feet, gloves on the windowsill, such an adrenaline charge running through him that he swung both feet over at once, clearing the sill by several inches, with enough energy to jump a mountain.

Screaming, something gone terribly wrong, like he’d landed in the mouth of a shark, then realizing what it was with a crushing desperation, saw in that gray-green light the rusty metal teeth of a grizzly snare sunk into his shinbones, clamped halfway up his throbbing tibias.

He tore his gloves trying to pull the jaws apart, grunting, teeth gritted, veins rising from his forehead. *Oh God, I fucked up. The Alphas are gonna kill me.*

But the jaws didn’t budge. He could hear his legs splintering as he stared at the man he’d shot, the teeth burrowing deeper, closing slowly, and through the bone-fracturing pain, he realized there was something wrong with the guard—longhaired, pajamaed—and it was this: He had rigor mortis. He was stiff, rigid, dead for hours, maybe a day. *What the fuck?*

And the grainy green turned to blinding white as a shotgun boomed. His vest caught most of the pellets, but the force knocked him back onto the floor. He ripped off his goggles, reached for the Beretta, footsteps coming toward him and the unmistakable horror of a twelve-gauge pumping,

thinking, *The vest will buy me time to spray them.* He aimed at the light, but the time wasn't there. They don't make a vest for your face.

SIXTY-SIX

Jonas could tell right away that the man was already dead, his face polka-dotted with buckshot. Besides, he wasn't sitting right. His head tilted unnaturally to one side and the shotgun looked as if it had been propped up against him. *Means there's probably someone sitting a little ways down the corridor with some firepower trained on this spot.*

If the Alphas hadn't vetoed the use of radios, he'd have warned Roddy's dumb ass, since they probably had the same setup at the end of the north wing.

He slipped off his goggles. Didn't really need them yet, the moon bright as all get-out and lighting up the alcove like Christmas. He heard something in the distance behind him, glanced back across that long, narrow lake lathered in moonlight. At first, he thought they were men running toward him, then realized it was the wolves he'd been hearing, their heads rising and falling as they bounded through snow.

Why the fuck were they moving *toward* him? Ever since coming up to Alaska from L.A., all he'd heard was how skittish they were, and you were supposed to have an orgasm if you saw them in the wild. Fuck this Grizzly Adams shit. God, he missed the Valley. He turned back toward the lodge, raised the Beretta, and squeezed off a burst.

Suzanne was looking over her shoulder for Lucy when the glass of the west-facing window fell out. She hadn't heard a gunshot, and from where she sat, she couldn't see either window. Suzanne slowly rose to her feet, reaching for her radio, and as she pressed TALK, someone screamed at the other end of the lodge.

She backpedaled, heard the crunch of broken glass—someone in the alcove now—realized they'd put the bear trap on the wrong side.

A shotgun boomed somewhere on the north wing.

There was a bright, quiet muzzle flash at the end of her corridor.

Will pressed TALK, breathing so hard, he could barely speak. “Guy just came in through the east window. He’s dead.”

Kalyn said, “Copy that. We’ve had a visual. Everyone check in.”

“Devi, here. We’re fine.”

“Ken and Sean. We’re fine.”

After a moment, Kalyn said, “Suzanne? Lucy? Copy?”

No answer.

Will: “Kalyn, did you see or hear anything on the south wing?”

“No, just the glass breaking and the guy screaming at your end, so that had my attention. Look, everyone maintain your positions. I’ll check it out.”

Ken rose suddenly to his feet, as if he’d been resolved to stand for some time, his loops coiling, and just now worked up the nerve to spring.

“Dad,” Sean whispered, “what are you doing?”

“You know, we don’t deal in this currency.” He shook the Mossberg. “We’re gonna get ourselves killed sitting here.” He threw the shotgun down.

“Where are you going?”

“Out there.”

Ken strode twenty feet to the thick door and slid back the iron bolts.

“Dad!” Sean whispered. “You sure about this?”

“I love you, Sean. I’m sorry I brought you here.” He pulled open the door, and Sean could see a meter of snow just beyond the overhanging eave, the railing of the veranda nearly buried. The cold that swept into the passage made his eyes water.

Ken stepped over the threshold and pulled the door closed after him.

Jonas put on his goggles, stood at the edge of the alcove, surveying the corridor. He saw the woman he’d shot a short ways down—motionless,

sprawled, her shotgun unattended on the floor. He went and picked it up.

Looking down toward the end of the corridor, where it opened into the lobby, he saw bright green flares of light—lanterns perhaps. He could just make out the shape of someone sitting on the hearth.

He removed his white parka and snow pants, but instead of continuing down this corridor, he turned around and started for the stairwell.

Ken stood under the eave, feeling the cold infiltrate his down jacket. In the absence of lantern light from the passage, it took a full minute before his eyes picked out what detail the moon allowed—the veranda, buried under feet of drifted snow, the railing covered in places, poking through in others, the forest fifty yards to the east, out of which meandered a black stream, the snow dipping toward its banks in folds, something voluptuous about the curve, like white hips in the moonlight.

When he saw them, he wondered why the tracks paralleling the railing hadn't been the first thing to catch his attention, and, likewise, the figure who stood where they ended, perhaps thirty feet away in the farthest corner, pointing a gun at him.

Ken felt his heart trip over itself, but he managed to raise his arms.

The figure waved him over. Ken nodded, moving forward onto the snow, sinking to his waist, doing his best to negotiate the snowpack while keeping his hands above his head.

Ten feet from the masked figure, Ken saw a gloved palm extend in his direction.

He stopped, trying not to stare at the wicked-looking pistol aimed at his chest.

The figure wore a white mask to match his winter apparel, with a bar cut out that exposed his placid blue eyes, and the divoted bridge of his nose.

"What do you think you're doing?" the man asked.

Ken smiled nervously, ducked his head in greeting. "I just want you to know that my son and I are—"

"Where is your son?"

"Just inside that door. We're guests of this lodge. Or were, and we don't have any quarrel with you."

“How do you know?”

“Know what?”

“That we don’t have a quarrel.”

“Because I don’t know you.”

“I think it’s safe to say I have laxer prerequisites for having a quarrel.” The man raised the suppressed pistol to shoot Ken in the head.

“Oh God, please. I’m rich. That’s what I came out here to tell you.”

“You came out here to tell me that you’re rich?”

“Yeah.”

“Congratulations.”

“No, not just that. Also that I would give you any amount of money if you would let my son and me sit out whatever’s getting ready to go down in there.”

“You have this money with you?”

“No, but I could—”

The man squinted his eyes, grimaced. “What? I leave you my address? You send me a check?”

“Or a bank account number. It would be seven figures.”

The man seemed to consider this. “And we would operate on what? The honor system?”

“Please.”

“All right, let’s go.”

“Back to the door?”

“Yes.”

Ken turned away and started back across the veranda, his feet growing cold, snow having slid down into his boots. He felt a swell of pride at having walked out here and saved himself and Sean.

He said, “I’ll even tell you where everyone is in—”

At first, he thought the man had pushed him, that he wasn’t moving fast enough, and he tried to improve his pace, but something bloomed inside his right lung—a rod of molten pain—and he went down, kneeling in snow up to his neck, watching the man in white clean his blood off a piece of metal by running the blade between his gloved thumb and forefinger.

“I already know exactly where they are, Ken,” he said, proceeding on toward the door. “But many thanks.”

Ken stood up, accomplished three staggering steps in the snow.

The man in white had almost reached the door, but he stopped and glanced back, saw Ken standing there.

Ken heard the man sigh, watched him shake his head in annoyance.

He was coming back now, and two steps from Ken, he pulled the knife out of a hidden sheath stitched into his snow pants.

Ken reached out, put his hand on the man's right shoulder to stop himself from falling, and, as if in accommodation, the man grasped Ken's right shoulder and shoved the KA-BAR Marine Hunter eight times into his stomach.

Kalyn came to Suzanne and knelt in her blood, felt the guilt knocking, knew better than to let it take root. Any distraction could be fatal. She pulled out her radio.

"Suzanne's gone," she said. "So we know at least one of them has made it into the lodge." As she slipped the radio back into her pocket, a pack of shadows leaped through the open window into the south-wing alcove and disappeared up the stairwell.

A scream emanated from the lobby.

Kalyn grabbed her radio again, said, "Sean? Ken?"

Will's voice crackled: "You hear that?"

"Just sit tight. Stay where you—"

"No, I'm gonna check it out."

Rachael said, "You aren't leaving me here alone."

"I didn't say I was. Let's try to go without the flashlight, though. Might as well not advertise our position." He helped his wife to her feet and they progressed toward the specks of light in the lobby, dragging their hands along the wall, using it for a guide.

Jonas emerged from the stairwell onto the fourth floor. The corridor was empty, so he spent a moment unloading the shotgun, then dropping it on the floor. At the far end, lantern light shone from the lobby. He figured he'd claim a secure position and snipe from above.

He started down the corridor. The Beretta felt good in his gloved hands, but he didn't like passing all these doors, kept expecting one of them to swing open.

As far as he was concerned, the Alphas could fuck themselves. He wasn't putting his life in danger just to make sure he didn't kill the FBI agent or William Innis. They were storming this lodge in total darkness, no idea what they were walking into. Shit happened in this type of situation, and if someone jumped out of a corner, *buenos* fucking *noches*.

He heard screams somewhere in the lodge—definitely a man's.

The corridor suddenly filled with the noise of incoming footsteps. Jonas spun around, glanced back at the alcove, which was washed out in green light, the details obliterated by the flood of moonbeams. He knelt down, pulled off his goggles. The darkness was streaked with red, exploding with phantom light. His eyes struggled to adjust. He got the goggles back on just in time to see five wolves running toward him.

He squeezed off a burst. The one in front yelped and fell. The others leaped over their compatriot, still coming, unfazed, undeterred.

Two bursts. Another went down. *Fuck.* The slide locked back, three still coming.

He wasn't accustomed to automatic weapons—pull the trigger too hard, your magazine's spent in the blink of an eye. The Alphas had warned them about this. He ejected the clip, was going for another when the wolves reached him.

Jonas was a big man, 250 pounds, six three. He reminded himself of that and stood, bracing for impact, thinking, *I'll just snap some necks. Not like I haven't done that shit before.*

The two in front rammed into him at the same time, the force far beyond anything he'd expected, his head smashing hard into the floor.

He saw pricks of painful light. He was on his back, the Beretta gone, one wolf tearing into his right arm, the other two going for his face.

One of the wolves tore the goggles away. Teeth ripped through the parka around his neck, the down airborne like a shredded pillow. And it occurred to him, *They're going for your throat.*

Their slobber was warm, their breath foul. He tried to sit up, but they had both of his arms now, and a giant white wolf that seemed to glow in the dark was straddling him, teeth bared, inches above his face yet hesitating, as

if to savor this moment. At some level, outside the fear and the pain, Jonas recognized its sadistic patience, the pleasure-delay, and he thought, *This fucker's a real killer. Doing this shit for fun.*

SIXTY-SEVEN

Kalyn followed the south-end stairwell up past the second and third floors. She held the shotgun, her finger in the trigger guard. As she neared the fourth-floor alcove, she heard something—slurping, snarling, ripping.

She stepped into the alcove. It was pitch-black. She held the shotgun in one hand, a flashlight in the other. Its beam shot through the dark and illuminated a shotgun, shells all over the floor, two dead wolves, and three feasting wolves. They looked up, their mouths slicked with blood, their teeth bared, protecting their kill.

Kalyn's right arm ached with the weight of the shotgun. The wolves glanced at one another, as if consulting; then the big white one started toward her. *Gonna have to fire it with one arm.*

She kept the light beam on the white wolf, leveled the shotgun, fired, the twelve-gauge recoiling, whipping back, the scalding barrel popping her in the face.

She fell. The flashlight rolled across the floor. Just darkness in the corridor and the patter of the wolves coming. She got to her feet, pumped the shotgun, pulled the trigger. Pumped again, fired. Pumped, fired. Something whimpering. Pumped, fired. Pumped.

The corridor reeked of gun smoke, and it was silent now. She walked to the flashlight, picked it up, blood trailing down her face from where the shotgun had struck her forehead.

The beam of light passed through the smoke. Now there were three dead wolves less than ten feet away, but the white wolf and the gray one weren't among them.

She moved carefully toward the body in the corridor—a large man slumped over on the floor, faceless and eviscerated. *Two down. Thank God. Wolves did my work for me.*

She continued on toward the stairwell that would take her back down into the lobby.

Will and Rachael crept through the candlelit passage. Where it began to curve toward the veranda exit, Will stopped, whispered, “Wait here. If they’re dead, I don’t want you to see it. You’ve seen enough already.”

Will pushed on.

To his surprise, there was only one body—Sean’s—encompassed by more blood than it seemed possible for a human body to hold. Snow pants, a mask, and a white parka had been discarded by the door.

Four shotgun blasts thundered out from one of the upper floors.

Will ran back to Rachael.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Are they dead?”

“Sean is. Ken’s gone.”

Will’s radio squeaked.

Kalyn’s voice: “Bad guy number two is dead.”

“How?”

“Wolves. They got into the lodge through a broken window in the south-wing alcove. I killed one of them and two were already dead, so that leaves a pair running around here somewhere. Watch yourself. They’re mean as hell.”

Will pressed TALK: “Sean’s gone. Don’t know where his dad is, so another one of them got in.”

“Just get back to your post in the north corridor.”

Devlin’s voice: “Guys?”

“What, baby girl?”

“Are any of you up here? I hear footsteps outside the door.”

“Get the shotgun ready,” Will said. “That isn’t us, but we’re on our way.”

SIXTY-EIGHT

Kalyn moved across the stone floor of the lobby and sat down on the hearth in front of the giant fireplace. She kept looking up and down the north- and south-wing corridors, watching the exposed stairwells that climbed fifty feet toward the rafters on each side of the lobby, the passage behind her, the adjacent library door, closed and locked. She set the shotgun on the stone, fished four shells of buckshot out of the pocket of her fleece jacket. As she reached for the Mossberg to load the shells, a pair of black boots emerged from the flue into the enormous hearth behind her and lowered silently toward the grate.

Devlin illuminated her face with the flashlight beam and held her finger to her lips so the women could see.

She mouthed, “Shhh. Someone’s out there.”

She traded the flashlight for the shotgun but couldn’t remember if she’d pumped it, opted to wait, as the slightest noise would give them away. She crept up to the door, strained to listen. Thought she heard something like a soft exhalation on the other side, perhaps the scrape of fabric against fabric.

She dropped quietly to her knees, lowered herself onto the floor, the right side of her face flush against the carpet. Their room was dark, but a lantern flickered outside in the hallway.

Through the crack under the door, the strand of lantern light was broken in two places. She saw the tips of a pair of boots, could have poked a finger under the door and touched them.

Ten feet away, invisible in the darkness, the infant began to cry.

. . .

Will and Rachael slipped out of the passage and into the stairwell. No lanterns or candles here, the darkness absolute.

Rachael whispered, “Should I turn on the flashlight?”

“No. Just go slow and keep one hand on the wall like we did before.”

Even as he said it, Will knew they might be walking blindly to their death, couldn’t stop himself from picturing a man crouched on the next flight of stairs, outfitted with night-vision goggles, just waiting for them to stumble past.

They proceeded carefully, one step at a time, Will’s heart knocking so hard he feared he’d faint. This was far worse than the wolves. At least you could see your attacker coming outside.

They reached the landing. Will traced his hand along the wall, letting it guide them to the next flight of stairs. Three steps up, he stopped.

“What is it?” Rachael asked.

“I see a light up ahead. Wait here.”

Will ascended the remaining nine steps. At the top, he reached an archway, and from there he could glimpse the corridor, where a lantern mounted to the wall threw shadows and light on a man dressed in black, standing at the door that opened into Devlin’s room.

Will glanced back down the steps, waved Rachael up. She came, stood beside him as the corridor filled with a baby’s wailing. They raised their shotguns.

The man leaned against Devlin’s door, his ear pressed to the wood. Will felt an eerie chill radiate down from the base of his neck into his spine.

Will and Rachael eyed each other, and she could barely see his lips moving in the low light.

Will mouthed, “That’s Javier.”

The man spun, bullets striking the walls of the stairwell, the iron railing sparking.

The Innises returned fire, then dived back into the archway, ears ringing. Will pressed Rachael up against the wall, whispered, “You hit?”

“No, you?”

“No. Don’t move.” Will peeked around the corner, gun smoke drifting through the corridor. The door was splintered with buckshot but still intact. No one there, just sprinkles of blood. Will motioned for Rachael to join

him, and he spoke into her ear, “I think he’s pinned down at the end of the corridor, maybe fifteen feet away. All the doors are locked, so I don’t think there’s anyplace—”

Will heard a door squeak open.

SIXTY-NINE

Kalyn pushed the last shell of buckshot into the twelve-gauge and pumped it. She set it beside her, took out the Browning. The shotgun was good if you didn't know how to shoot, but you could easily get yourself killed in the time it took to absorb the shoulder-bruising recoil, pump it, and take aim. Her head was bleeding again, and she was dizzy from the blow.

As she wiped away the rivulet of blood trailing down her nose, the Browning flew out of her hand and slid across the stone, hitting the library door. She went for the shotgun, and as she realized it wasn't there, she felt its barrel, still blazing hot, push into the back of her neck.

"You will tell me your name."

She stared at the floor, said nothing.

"Are you the ex-FBI agent?"

"No, I've been imprisoned in this lodge for five years. But I can take you to her right now. She's just through that passage over—"

"Stand up." Kalyn stood. "Take three steps forward and slowly turn around, leaving your hands up, fingers open." Kalyn moved toward the doors, her arms raised. She stopped and turned.

A man garbed all in black stood in the hearth, covering her with her shotgun. Where his face wasn't streaked with soot, she saw that his skin was reddish brown, wondered if perhaps he was half Mayan.

He looked at Kalyn, said, "I'm afraid you resemble the photograph I have of Kalyn Sharp. Are there any other weapons on your person?" She shook her head. "Remove your jacket and your pants." Kalyn didn't move. "Take them off now, or what's going to happen to you will only last longer and involve more pain."

A pair of shotgun blasts tore out of the passage.

. . .

Will yelled into the corridor, "*You wanna walk out of here, Javier?* Two of your friends are already dead."

. . .

A small explosion around the corner shook the floor beneath Will's feet.

After a moment, another noise filled the passage—a zipper in motion, followed by the sound of something dragging across the floor. Will didn't risk taking a peek.

"Hello, Will. Were you able to locate your wife?"

"Yes."

"I hope the very short amount of time you've had together was worth the pain that is coming your way."

"Look, you have nowhere to go, and there're two of us here with shotguns."

Something went *whisk* in the corridor.

"What was that?" Will asked. The sweeter smell of tobacco smoke mixed in with the cordite. Will was thinking, *Maybe I should just go for it, poke out mid-sentence, hope to catch him off guard.*

"Do you remember, Will, the substance of our last conversation?"

"Yes, you—"

"I extended you and Kalyn the opportunity to improve the outcome of our inevitable future meeting."

"Javier—"

"And you did not accept my offer."

"Jav—"

"What? *What*, Will? What are you about to propose? That we call things a day? Do you believe I have traveled all these miles, at great expense, suffered cold and snow, the myriad wrongs to me and my family, only to turn right around and go home now that I have found you? Please answer me."

"No."

"Well said."

Will looked at Rachael, whispered, "We're gonna have to kill him."

"Will, I know your daughter is behind that door. Would you care to know my plans involving her?"

SEVENTY

Fidel finished patting down Kalyn. She was already sweating, her hands restless with nervous tremors.

The man began to shift back and forth on the balls of his feet like a prize-fighter. He grinned. “We go a few rounds? Hand-to-hand combat?”

Kalyn backed slowly away. He pursued.

She asked, “Where’s Javier?”

“Don’t worry. He’ll be along.”

Fidel faked a lunge, drew back into a boxer’s stance, and jabbed, his reach longer than what seemed commensurate with his height.

She slipped the punch, thinking, *Next time you better fire back.*

He smiled. “You’re quick. Still, I am going to knock all of your teeth out of your mouth and shatter the bones in your face. Do you know what’s going to happen after that?”

Fidel charged. Kalyn sidestepped, his elbow catching her above the left eye. She staggered back, blood sheeting down her face in a flood of warm pain, then turned, sprinting for the Browning. She could see it against the library door, glinting in the firelight.

Fidel whistled. She froze. He came forward, holding the Mossberg at waist level.

“¡Vamos!”

She was twenty feet away, point-blank range for a shotgun, no way to miss unless you set your mind to it.

“¡Vamos!”

Kalyn walked back toward the hearth.

He said, “Get down on the floor.”

She complied, watched him jog over to the library door and pick up the Browning. Fidel pocketed the clip, ejected the live round, then dropped the empty pistol on the floor. He returned and stood over Kalyn, pumping the shotgun again and again. For a moment, she thought he was fucking with her, then wondered if he was confused, unsure of how to operate the weapon. When she saw the shells falling on the stone, she understood.

He slung the shotgun across the lobby, where it slammed into the wall.

“Get up.”

Kalyn struggled to her feet, her head in agony.

The blade caught a sliver of lantern light as the Alpha moved toward her.

Will inched the shotgun barrel toward the corner as Javier spoke.

“I will disarm you, your wife, and Kalyn, immobilize you, and let you watch me slowly and methodically take her apart.”

“What has my daughter done to you, Javier?”

“She is loved by you. That is plenty.”

Devlin gripped the shotgun. Nothing to do but trust she’d pumped it several hours ago. She stood at the door, found the lock in the darkness, slowly turned the dead bolt.

She grasped the doorknob, trying to remember if it had squeaked when she’d opened it before. *Turn it slowly. Slower than you’ve ever done anything in your entire life.*

The knob turned. Painstakingly, she pulled the door open—just an inch so it could clear the frame. A ribbon of light stretched across the floor, and Devlin let the doorknob ease back into place.

The man’s voice sounded close, a few feet up the corridor.

She pulled the knob again, opening the door another inch, light texturing the exterior. It was chewed up by buckshot—a swath of damage near the floor, another at the top of the door frame. She peeked around the corner, glanced up the corridor. Javier was squatting down along the wall beside a black duffel bag, his back to her, a cigarette dangling from his lips. In one hand, he held a pistol fitted with a silencer and a long magazine. In his other hand was a small device that reminded her of an oversize PEZ dispenser. Javier crouched ten feet from the stairwell, where, under the archway, Devlin’s father was hunched down with a shotgun.

When he saw her, his eyes went wide and he shook his head and mouthed, “Get back inside that room.”

SEVENTY-ONE

Kalyn held out her hands as she backed away from Fidel, realized she hadn't heard anything from the Innises since the shotgun blasts a few minutes ago, wondered if they'd managed to get themselves killed.

Fidel's knife didn't look particularly menacing—a black plastic handle with finger grips supporting a four-inch blade, each side slightly serrated, the end curving to a nasty point. He held it in his right hand, moving nimbly on his feet, a hard, focused determination pulsing in his black eyes.

"This makes you proud? To fight a woman this way? You know I'm outmatched." She was backpedaling toward the opening of the south-wing corridor, Fidel's face becoming less distinct, more shadowy than firelit.

"This has not a thing to do with my pride," he said. "This is only about causing you pain." He lunged, swiped—a fluid, lightning motion, and before she could react, Kalyn's right arm felt suddenly cold, blood running under the sleeve of her fleece jacket, dripping off the ends of her fingers, but no pain yet, only that awful metallic cold. Next came a ripping sound: fleece splitting. Another flash of ice, this time spreading down through her abdomen.

"Javier warned me not to touch you, but I don't think he'll mind a little innocent necking."

She felt light-headed. The instructor in a grappling seminar at the Academy had said something that now banged around inside her head like a prophecy fulfilled. *The most dangerous adversary you'll ever face is an opponent who's skilled with a knife. Avoid these confrontations at all costs.*

She backed into the corridor, her legs weakening, blood streaming down her thighs, her shinbones, into her socks. It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

They will take you slowly apart if you don't know what you're doing.

She could barely see Fidel now—just a silhouette against the low light of the lobby.

He advanced on her again and she felt the draft from knife wipes passing within inches of her face.

He sliced her right hand. Carved a two-inch line across her cheek, just missing her nose.

They were midway down the corridor now, and every passing second, it hurt more to breathe, the cold transforming into a glow in her chest.

She tripped over Suzanne's body, fell, scrambled back onto her feet. Fidel slipped on the blood but caught himself. He was close again, within three feet, and cornering her into the alcove. In the bright moonlight that came through the broken window, she saw her fleece pants slicked with blood.

Fidel said, "You are not bleeding too much I hope. This is foreplay. Don't come yet. Javier would never forgive me."

He opened the top of her left leg, but she didn't respond to the pain, turning instead, as if to break for the stairwell, heard the floor creak as he lunged after her, Kalyn spinning to face him, catching Fidel in the exact mistake she'd prayed for—a wide, careless knife swipe—which she parried, now palming his elbow, her other hand grasping his wrist. A quick jerk broke the man's forearm, just a soft snap followed by a howl of pain that was squelched when she punched him in the throat, a solid, direct hit, the hardest blow she'd ever landed, powered by hips and fear and rage.

With all her strength, she grabbed Fidel's arm and shoulder and hurled him toward the east-facing window.

The springs squeaked.

Fidel screamed.

In the moonlight, she saw him pinned between the rusty jaws of the grizzly trap, his wrists caught, the teeth burrowed into his stomach, his back, and still struggling to close, the hinges creaking.

Through clenched teeth, he screamed Javier's name.

Kalyn moved toward him, saw the pool of blood expanding within the circular boundary of the snare.

She reached down for his knife.

"*Por favor,*" he begged. "I can't feel my legs."

Kalyn smiled through her own pain. He spit at her.

"I want you to make this easy on me," she said. "And on you. Tilt your head back. Show me your throat."

He said something in Spanish that she didn't understand.

“Look, I’ve got things to do. Wanna sit here? Bleed out slowly while the trap finishes its supper?”

“*Dios,*” he whispered. “*Dios.*” He couldn’t even cross himself.

Fidel stared at the ceiling and thought of a woman named Maria.

. . .

Devlin shouldered the shotgun, trying to remember what Kalyn had told her several hours ago. *Kicks like hell, so lean into it. Aim at the head or below the waist.* She was standing in the threshold, one foot in the room, one foot in the corridor.

Devlin aimed at the man’s head, slipped her finger into the curve of the trigger.

She squeezed.

Nothing happened.

Oh God, I didn’t pump it.

The baby screamed.

Javier glanced over his shoulder, spotted Devlin standing in the doorway.

As Will stepped out into the corridor and leveled his twelve-gauge shotgun on Javier, something rolled across the floor, between his legs.

Will was absorbing a slide show of images: Devlin struggling to pump her shotgun; Javier diving away, shielding his head; Rachael’s quizzical face as she stared at the black device that had come to rest against the toe of her left boot.

Then Will’s world exploded in a flash of brilliant, deafening light.

SEVENTY-TWO

Kalyn heard the explosion as she swiped the magazine for the Browning back from Fidel. She limped through the darkness of the first-floor corridor, desperate for some decent light to see how badly she'd been cut. It hurt terribly, particularly through her midsection, though she didn't seem to be bleeding as profusely as before.

She stopped thirty feet from where the corridor opened into the lobby. The white wolf moved past the freestanding hearth, trotting in her direction, toward the south-wing corridor. At first, she thought it hadn't seen her, that perhaps it was heading for the staircase, but its head was already dipped, hackles rising, and she could hear the deep, guttural rumbling in its throat—a low, malicious growl. The Browning was in the lobby, she'd left Fidel's knife in the alcove, and there was no time to reach the only unlocked door in the vicinity—the room where she'd left her sister, unconscious.

There are weapons on the fourth floor—a shotgun and a machine pistol.

The wolf passed into the darkness of the corridor, and she turned and ran as hard as she could up the passage, every step sending a shock of agony through her abdomen.

She reached the alcove, heard the wolf panting behind her, closing the distance between them with every stride. She was telling herself she'd outrun him in the stairwell, thought for some reason he couldn't move as quickly up the steps.

She turned into the stairwell.

The gray wolf was coming down the last flight of stairs, and it snarled when it saw her, its teeth wet in the moonlight, black with blood.

The white one was fast approaching.

She saw the window, the glass broken out, rushed over, climbed up onto the sill, glanced back, the wolves right there, yellow and pink eyes raging.

No other choice. She jumped down into the snow—a rush of cold—thinking, *The front entrance is locked, but I can bang on it, get him to let me in. If I can get there, I can make it back inside.* But it was a long way, the entire length of the south wing, through deep drifts.

She was practically swimming through the snow now, clumps of it falling down her collar, melting on her neck, and the wind had kicked up, blowing powder into her face like a swarm of tiny pins.

It was a bright night, with a huge moon and loads of stars, but her vision seemed to be darkening. She looked back, having already gone thirty feet out from the window, saw one of their heads emerge from the snow, the wolves fighting their way through deep powder in a movement that resembled swimming dolphins.

Will thought, *I'm not dead.* He sat up, unsure of how long he'd been unconscious. For a moment, he could see only a single frame of white. Someone, presumably Devlin, was calling out to him, but her voice was distant and muddled.

His vision restored—washed-out tones of lantern light and shadow, Rachael sitting up behind him, conscious and intact, her pants blackened from the close-range detonation.

Rachael asked, "Are you okay?" but his voice seemed trapped in his head.

Devlin was kneeling in front of him, and he tried to read her lips, but the disorientation stymied his effort.

Will climbed to his feet and careened into the wall.

Kalyn moved faster now, groaning with each step, focused on nothing but her legs powering through the snow. The next time she looked up, she realized she'd veered off course, away from the lodge, and was actually heading downslope toward the lake and the floatplane dock.

The wolves were still coming. She could see nothing of the white one but its eyes.

She reached the lakeshore, the moon's reflection in the water disturbed, waves slamming into the snowy bank.

The wolves kept coming.

She looked up toward the lodge entrance, and there he was, wading toward her through the snow, a black duffel bag slung over his shoulder, a machine pistol in one hand, a Mossberg in the other.

The sound of the Beretta and the bullets ripping through the snow was lost to the wind. Kalyn only saw the wolves disappear under the snowpack, where they would remain until next June, when the snow broke and the scavengers came.

Javier stopped a few feet away, the black fabric over his right shoulder shredded by buckshot.

“You’re bleeding,” he said.

Kalyn stood shivering in the cold, bracing against the wind. “Your friend had a fairly liberal interpretation of ‘don’t touch her.’ ”

“You killed him.”

She nodded.

Javier glanced back at the lodge. “Just you and me and the Innises now.”

Kalyn felt lines of blood trailing warmly into her boots.

“So,” Javier said, unscrewing the silencer from the Beretta’s barrel, “shall we?”

“You can barely stand, Will.”

“My balance is coming back.” He took the shotgun out of Devlin’s hand.

“You both stay here. How’s your leg?”

“It hurts bad.”

“I know, but you’re lucky, Rach. That flashbang went off right underneath you.”

“What’s a flashbang?” Devlin asked.

“Stun grenade.”

Somewhere beyond the walls of Ethan’s room, a shotgun thundered.

“Is that inside?” Rachael asked.

“I can’t tell.”

Staccato shots responded to the Mossberg, automatic gunfire, which from inside the lodge sounded like beads dropping on a glass table.

Will staggered out into the corridor and closed the door behind him, his ears still ringing, unable even to hear his own footsteps as he hurried down the stairs and into the passage.

The wind shrieked under the brilliant Alaskan moon, building towers of snow against anything in its way.

Will saw the blood briefly—black smears by the lakeshore—before the wind concealed it with snow.

Waves of dizziness washed over him.

He spotted what appeared to be bloody tracks leading away from the lake toward the woods, though in the brutal wind, they were vanishing before his eyes, and would certainly be gone before he could reach the trees.

He collapsed, struggled back onto his feet, and started toward the woods as the tracks filled in, smoothed over and erased by the coldest wind ever to sting his cheeks.

Nine days ago, Kalyn Sharp had come to his home in Colorado. Nine days.

Is it over? he wondered. Nothing would have surprised him now.

He tried to deny the relief lurking in the nether regions of his conscience, but there was something so inescapably fitting about them killing each other, if that was in fact what had happened out here.

Will stopped after ten agonizing steps. He didn’t have the strength to walk into those woods and dig through four feet of snow to find their bodies. He scarcely had the balance to stand. But he went on—tired, so very tired—when all he wanted was to make a fire in the library and fall asleep with Devlin and Rachael in his arms, wake up someplace else.

Talisman

SEVENTY-THREE

Devlin felt the g force push her down in the seat as the seaplane lifted into the air, the inner lake falling away, the lodge and the floatplanes dwindling into toys, accessories to a child's train set.

The sound of the props intensified, the De Havilland Twin Otter roaring south.

It was four hundred miles to Anchorage. Two hours to civilization. Devlin glanced around the cabin at the surviving women. She reached down, took her mother's hand in hers, laced their fingers together. Rachael smiled. Between the pair of 620-horsepower engines and no headphones, it was too noisy to talk.

Staring out the window, Devlin said a prayer for Buck Young. The bush pilot had landed on the inner lake yesterday morning, found them, and then flown back to Fairbanks for help.

Devlin turned her attention toward the world below, thinking, *Somewhere down there, under all that snow, lies Kalyn.* Her father had searched until dawn for their bodies, but the wind had tucked them away for a long hibernation. She registered a flicker of relief and sorrow, would always remember flying out of this wilderness because of the tension inside her, the unresolvable contradiction she would just have to live with, and for years to come would mark this moment, in all its emotional complexity, as her first breath, first heartbeat as a grown-up.

Soon the Wolverine Hills had diminished into forested ripples of earth. She turned away from the window, from this wilderness she would not see again, swallowing to release the pressure in her ears.

. . .

Cook Inlet opened into the Gulf of Alaska, a universe of glittering dark blue water that stretched to the horizon. Devlin watched the paths of ships and oil tankers moving south toward the Pacific and continental America.

The De Havilland banked and descended. They were over land again, and looking out her window, Devlin could see the skyline of Anchorage and, just beyond, the shining, glaciated sprawl of the Chugach Range.

SEVENTY-FOUR

They touched down at Lake Hood Seaplane Base just shy of 1:00 P.M., after taxiing for several minutes over the choppy water. Two seats ahead, a woman began to sob uncontrollably, so loudly that everyone could hear, even over the drone of the props.

A second woman started to cry, then a third. They were all on Devlin's side of the plane, and when she peeked over the seat in front of her, she saw them staring out the windows.

She looked, too, the glass streaked with windblown lake water. They were approaching a series of docks, and right away, she picked out their destination. A dozen ambulances had backed up to the one on the end, the rear doors thrown open, paramedics standing by with stretchers. Devlin spotted a procession of police cruisers behind the ambulances, lights flashing, waiting to escort the women to Providence Alaska Medical Center. Two fire engines idled beyond the cruisers—they would lead the motorcade. A nearby parking lot was filling fast with cars, vans, three news trucks—giant satellites perched on their roofs, transmitting the scene across the world.

A crowd had formed along the shore. People were taking pictures, shooting videos. Firemen and police officers stood guard behind a barrier of yellow crime-scene tape.

The woman sitting two rows back suddenly shouted, "Oh God, there's Jimmy! It's Jimmy! He's a teenager!"

Devlin noticed that a handful of people had been allowed past the police barrier. They were gathered at the end of the dock—husbands, sisters, brothers, children, parents—and Devlin could see that every one of them stood crying, hands cupped to mouths, some outright weeping and prostrate, others signing "I love you" toward the seaplane.

The engines quit.

Devlin looked at her mother, her father, saw tears running down their faces, too. There was no stopping it, the emotion so sharp, so intense, it seemed to suck the oxygen out of the cabin. The women on the other side of

the plane were unbuckling their seat belts, leaning across to look out the windows that faced the dock, searching for their loved ones amid the throng.

The pontoons bumped into the wooden pylons. The base crew went to work tethering the plane, tying down the props.

The families of the women pressed up to the end of the dock, and Devlin watched a man kneel down and reach out over the water, his hand just able to touch the window that framed his wife's face.

His voice was muffled, but Devlin heard him say, "Oh God, Melinda! Oh God!"

"Jeff!"

A police officer walked over and patted the man's shoulders, said, "Sir, I know it's emotional, but we have some women on the plane who need immediate medical attention."

"I'm right here, Melinda!" he yelled. "Right here!"

The officer led him and the others a little ways back from the plane.

The pilot opened the De Havilland's door. Light streamed in. Devlin felt the frigid air, thought she smelled the ocean. A paramedic ducked into the plane—a young man with a goatee and stylish sideburns—his face darkening at the sight of the passengers.

He steadied himself and said, "We have ambulances waiting outside for everyone."

Rachael stood up, said, "Take that woman in front first."

The paramedic knelt down. "What's her name?"

"Natalie."

He was staring at an eighty-pound woman, severely malnourished and catatonic, who'd suffered so much trauma, it had destroyed her mind.

"My name's Rick," he said. "Your family's here, Natalie. I'm gonna carry you out, okay?"

He unbuckled the safety belt and lifted the woman from her seat, turning around carefully in the cramped space near the door and the cockpit. Through her window, Devlin watched another paramedic take Natalie out of Rick's arms. He was cradling her like a child, her eyes open yet seeing nothing. Someone draped a blanket over her.

A man emerged from the crowd, staggered toward Natalie. He was pale and shell-shocked, like he'd encountered a ghost or become one himself.

Rachael grabbed Devlin’s and Will’s hands. “Guys?” she whispered. “You see what you did? It isn’t just about our family.”

Outside, the paramedic said, “Is this your wife, sir?” The man had no voice, could only nod.

“Why don’t you come with me. You can ride with us to Providence.”

SEVENTY-FIVE

Will dutifully tread and retread his story, from start to finish, so many times that he could tell it without thinking, without feeling, to the special agents in charge with the FBI's Phoenix and Anchorage field offices, to Inspection Division agents from the Bureau's headquarters, to Border Patrol, ATF, even a detective from the Pima County Sheriff's Department, successor to Teddy Swicegood, who had died of a stroke two and a half years earlier on a golf course in Sierra Vista.

The FBI had been looking for Kalyn Sharp for the last year, since it had come to light that she'd defrauded the Bureau, absconding with $150,000, which they suspected she'd used to track down her sister. They called her "a rogue agent, mentally unstable," said that had she not been killed in Alaska, serious prison time would have loomed in her immediate future.

"Just to be clear, you do understand who this character was?" Agent Messing said, his big West Texas accent filling the drab hotel room.

It was two days before Rachael's scheduled release from the psychiatric hospital at the University of Colorado, and this young DEA agent from the Phoenix Field Office sat on the couch in Will and Devlin's suite at the Oxford in downtown Denver. Will had been staring out the window toward the Front Range, his patience worn ragged by the steady stream of agents from more law-enforcement agencies than he cared to keep track of.

He replied, "Kalyn told me he was with the Alphas."

"Not *with*. Number-two honcho. We had a bug in a Tempe ware house they'd been using. One in Jav's car. One in his mansion. I could put my hand on the Bible and say he's the scariest sumbitch I ever encountered."

"You met him?"

"Once. At a Starbucks in Scottsdale. I'd been tailing him for a few days, and he made me while he was ordering."

"What happened?"

“We had espressos on the patio.”

The agent unbuttoned his too-tight Belk suit, ran his fingers through a blond crew cut that let too much of his oily scalp shine through.

“What is it?” Will asked.

Agent Messing shook his head. “This ain’t for public consumption, and in fact, it can’t walk out of this room.”

Will got up, went over to the open door that led into Devlin’s bedroom, where MTV blared from the television.

He closed it, returned to the chair, and when he was sitting down again, Messing said, “I had reason to believe, and this is coming from a reliable source, that Javier wanted out.”

“Out of what?”

“Everything. His marriage. The Alphas.”

“Why the Alphas?”

“Greed probably. Whatever the motivation, it wasn’t rooted in goodness. Wasn’t ’cause he found Jesus. Nothing like that. The man is pure evil. But the point is, you don’t leave the Alphas. It’s blood in, blood out. Know what I mean?”

Will shook his head.

“You kill to join, and the only way to leave is through death. In light of this development, we really, really wanted to catch up with Mr. Estrada. For whatever reason, he was unhappy with the Alphas, and he could have made a devastating witness, blown the whole thing apart. Now, his widow’s a stone fucking wall, but if there’s anything else you might know or remember . . .” Will shook his head. “Well, here.” Messing reached into an inner pocket of his jacket, produced a card. “Anything surfaces, call me. Day or night.”

“I will.”

Messing stood and Will rose to shake his hand. “I’m guessing you’ve had a revolving door of visitors from every federal agency under the sun.”

“Yeah, it’s been taxing.”

“Then I won’t keep you. I’m glad you’ve got your family back, Mr. Innis.”

Will walked Messing out, decided as they stepped into the hallway just to go ahead and ask him.

“Tell me something,” Will said.

“Shoot.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Worried about what?”

“A visit in the middle of the night.”

Messing let out a soft sigh and studied the carpet under his dull shoes in a way that made Will nervous, like he wasn’t going to like the answer. He was half-wishing now he hadn’t even asked.

“I don’t know, Mr. Innis. It’s sketchy territory, trying to predict what the Alphas will and won’t do. I guess what it’ll probably come down to is whether or not you’re on their radar.”

“Do you think I am?”

“No way to know. I understand that’s not the piece of comfort pie you want to hear, but it’s the truth, I’m sorry to say.”

“What would you do?”

“If I was in your boots?”

“Yeah.”

Messing cracked his thick linebacker’s neck. “I’m gonna tell you something that’s gonna be both horrifying *and* freeing. There ain’t nothing you can do, short of move your family to some overpopulated Third World shithole and disappear. If the Alphas decide to come calling, you won’t stop them. Not with a shotgun under the bed. Not with different names. They’re just plain the nastiest motherfuckers anyone’s ever heard of. So live your life, Mr. Innis. Don’t look over your shoulder or buy a home security system or anything of the sort. Just pray you were a blip on their radar that has long since disappeared.”

SEVENTY-SIX

It had been a little over two months since they'd landed in Anchorage, weeks that had taken years to pass. For five of them, Rachael had undergone treatment and counseling at the psychiatric hospital in Denver. But these last few weeks, leading up to Christmas Eve, they'd been together, seeing if the pieces still fit in that quaint farmhouse in Mancos, Colorado. Devlin wasn't sick, and Rachael was eight and a half months pregnant. They'd hired a midwife out of Farmington, New Mexico, to attend the home birth, expecting to have a little one in the first or second week of the new year. Will was coming to terms with the fact that the child in that enormous belly of Rachael's didn't possess a single chromosome of his DNA.

He remembered Devlin's birth, sixteen years ago, could still recall the lightning that had struck when she'd come screaming into the world, still teared up thinking about it—that fierce, inexorable love that had altered everything he thought he knew about priorities. What kept him up lately, these long December nights, was the fear that he wouldn't feel those things when this baby came, wondered how you faked a thing like that, how you raised something you didn't feel belonged to you.

He prayed to God every night that the lightning would strike again.

It had been a cool, dry Christmas Eve, and much to the Innises' delight, little snow had fallen so far this season in the Mancos Valley. You could see patches of it gleaming under the sun or the moon on the rim of Mesa Verde, and the La Platas were buried above ten thousand feet. But the pasture out back stood bare; the river slacked off to a trickle. No snow lingered under the spruce trees that enclosed the farmhouse. There wasn't even a fading patch to be found in the north-facing shadows—Devlin had gone looking that afternoon.

She was thriving, out of school for Christmas vacation and spending all her time with her mother—hoisting Rachael out of chairs, cooking for her, cleaning, helping to prepare the nursery in what had been an empty bedroom when she and her father were on their own.

It was only at night when she thought of Alaska, in bed, buried under covers, listening to the wind blow through the firs. A few nights ago, a pack of coyotes had moved through the pasture. Their yaps woke her at 3:00 A.M.—evil, mocking laughter—and she sat up in bed, thought for half a second she was back in the Wolverine Hills, saw that huge white wolf with raging pink eyes standing at the foot of her bed.

She'd thrown back the covers and walked into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, and sat down at the table, listening to them howl until her hands quit trembling.

One of Rachael's therapists in Denver had said something that applied to them all. If you let fear take hold, if you let it own you, your life ceases to be your own. She'd even given them a motto, a creed—concise, profane, and unforgettable. Devlin had glanced at the refrigerator clipboard where Will had scribbled it in black Magic Marker, thrice underscored.

Fuck the fear.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

Devlin is already rubbing her eyes. It's nine o'clock, late for a six-year-old. She stands on her tiptoes and hangs the last ornament on the tree—a clear glass cactus. Her parents are sitting on the couch, sipping hot toddies—Arizona-style: fresh-squeezed orange juice, hot water, Grand Marnier, honey, dash of cayenne.

It's a warm December night. Devlin climbs onto the sofa between Rachael and Will.

"Everybody up for It's a Wonderful Life*?" he asks.*

"I'll probably fall asleep before Harry falls through the ice, but sure," Rachael says. Will walks over to the television set, finds the video in Devlin's movie cabinet, pops it into the VCR. He brings the remote back with him. "Will, I'm cold," Rachael says. "Would you get my sweatshirt?"

"I'm not sure how I feel about touching that hideous thing."

She grins. "Back off my alma mater." Will had gone to law school at Carolina while Rachael was finishing her undergrad work at Duke. The schools were only seven miles apart as the crow flies, but a more malicious rivalry you could not find in all of collegiate America. The sweatshirt was a badly faded navy blue, the letters—D-U-K-E—having long since peeled away, leaving only a less faded palimpsest of the word.

Will retrieves it from the sweater chest in their bedroom, brings it back into the den.

"Thanks, honey." He sits down with his family, presses PLAY. His dark-haired girls snuggle up on either side of him, and whether it's the holiday or this movie that always makes him cry, Will is briefly overcome, keenly aware of what he has. There is only the small white lights of the Christmas tree, the glow of the FBI warning on the television screen. And for a moment, before the movie begins, the house is so quiet, they can hear the wind blowing out on the desert.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Acade later, in a different state, in what felt to each of them like a different life, the Innises were decorating another tree—a blue spruce Will had chopped down in a small grove by the river two days ago. Rachael lay stretched out on the couch in the living room, watching her husband and daughter hang unfamiliar ornaments and makeshift tube-sock stockings from the mantel. A fire was petering out in the small stone hearth. The farmhouse smelled of wood smoke, hot cocoa, the sap from their Christmas tree.

"You remember those hot toddies we used to make?" Rachael said.

Will smiled. "God, those were good."

"What's a toddy?" Devlin asked.

"It's a hot alcoholic drink. We used to make ours with orange juice, Grand Marnier. . . . I forget what else we put in them."

"Cayenne," Rachael said. "Most important ingredient."

"Maybe we can make them next year?"

"Definitely."

Devlin sat at the end of the couch, opposite her mother, massaging Rachael's feet. "I've got a great idea," she said. "Let's watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, like we used to."

"Do we still have that video?" Rachael asked.

"No," Will said. "It got left in Ajo with everything else. But I guess I could drive into town, see if the video store's still open."

"No, don't leave," Rachael said. "We'll remember it for next year."

"Yes. Next year. We'll do all our old traditions."

"But I don't want to go to bed yet, Dad. Can't we stay up together a little longer?"

"Sure, baby girl. Of course we can."

Rachael suddenly shivered, said, "Will, I'm cold."

Will’s socks slid on the dusty hardwood floor as he walked down the hallway into their bedroom. He was already untucking the quilt from the corners when he happened to think of it. He let go of the cover and climbed across the mattress, knelt down on the floor on the other side, opened the deep drawer on his bedside table. There it was. Eight weeks and he hadn’t even thought about it until now. Hadn’t needed to. He reached into the drawer, pulled out Rachael’s navy blue sweatshirt.

He smelled it. The garment no longer carried her true scent, hadn’t for years.

He sat for a moment on the floor near the window, a view of the moonlit pasture through the glass, just holding Rachael’s shirt to his face, sliding his hands over the soft fabric, feeling the cloth between his fingers. He’d slept so many nights alone, this sweatshirt wrapped around his arm. When it had finally lost Rachael’s smell, he’d gone out and bought the perfume she’d worn, sprayed the sweatshirt with the fragrance.

I don’t need this anymore, he thought. He stood, wiped his face, took Rachael’s sweatshirt with him, and walked out of their bedroom, back down the hallway, stopping where it opened into the living room.

They were still together on the couch in the light of the dwindling fire.

His daughter. His unborn child. His wife.

And he thought of all the women who’d been rescued from that lodge, imagined them in this moment, this Christmas Eve, back in their homes with families they had never expected to see again.

He delivered Rachael’s sweatshirt, saying, “We’re gonna need more wood to save this fire. I’m gonna go out and grab an armful.” Will walked into the kitchen. Devlin could hear him stepping into his boots, the doors opening, the screen door banging closed after him. She sat down on the cool hardwood floor beside her mother.

Rachael said, “So what were Christmases like for you and Dad while I was gone?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t do much. They were just, like . . . sad, you know? Really sad. Last year was the first time we actually put up a tree. What were yours like?”

“I never knew when Christmas came, honey. Usually, I didn’t even know if it was December, although there were days when I remember thinking, *This feels like Christmas.* Honestly, I’m glad I never knew when it came.

I think that would have broken me.” Rachael sucked through her teeth and winced. “Ooooh.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

She was rubbing her stomach. “Nothing. Just a little contraction.”

“Is it time?”

“No, honey. These are just Braxton-Hicks. You’ll know when it’s the real deal.”

“How?”

“I’ll be swearing like a sailor.”

SEVENTY-NINE

It was a cold night, windless, starry. The gravel crunched under Will's boots.

The woodpile stood against the stone chimney at the side of the house. He filled his arms with logs and carried them to the front porch, dropped the first load at the foot of the steps. On the way back to the woodpile, he stopped. He could see the pasture in the distance, glowing under the full moon. There were shadows moving across it.

He froze. The thudding of his heart seemed to pluck at the silence like a guitar string as he counted half a dozen deer sauntering over the turned earth, working their way toward the river for an evening drink. They looked albino in the moonlight, so bright out there, he could see their breath clouds.

Will exhaled slowly as the fear receded, and he wondered if it would always be this way—that breathless anxiety as he rounded corners, listening for clandestine footsteps in the silence, looking for movement where none should be. He could tell himself a thousand times that the Alphas would never come for them, but that didn't mean it would or wouldn't happen. Messing had been right. These things, he couldn't control.

Live your life, Mr. Innis.

Fuck the fear.

Will reached into his pocket, pulled out Javier's BlackBerry, which he'd taken from Kalyn's pack two months ago, before they'd flown out of the Wolverine Hills.

He kept it charged and always with him like a pocket time bomb, waiting for a call—from whom, he did not know. Maybe Jav's wife or an Alpha compadre.

He turned it on, stared at the glowing screen. There had been no calls. The BlackBerry wasn't going to vibrate. He'd been holding on to this device as an obsessive-compulsive talisman—he checked for messages every hour—as if before the Alphas came for them, they would call first, as

if nothing could happen to his family without advance warning, as long as he religiously checked for incoming communication.

“I should throw this piece of shit at the chimney,” he said aloud, his grip tightening around the BlackBerry, his finger inadvertently pressing a button on the side.

The screen changed to show a list of folders, SMS OUTBOX drawing his attention, and he clicked the icon to open the folder containing sent text messages, wondering why this hadn’t occurred to him before. Maybe he could find some phone numbers and addresses of Javier’s associates, forward them on to Agent Messing.

The last two text messages had been sent to the same phone number, Phoenix area code:

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2007 • 10:41 A.M. AKDT
J—Arctic Skies, Buck Young. We leave at 1:00 P.M. today for the Wolverine Hills: 200 miles west of Fairbanks. K.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2007 • 11:03 P.M. AKDT
J—Fairbanks, Alaska. Here in one piece, but barely. K.

He opened a calendar on the BlackBerry, his heart accelerating, mouth running dry. Eleven P.M., on October 18, would have been the night he, Devlin, and Kayln spent in Fairbanks at the Best Western. October 19, the day they’d flown to the Wolverine Hills. The BlackBerry had been in Kalyn’s possession both days.

What the hell? You told him where to find us?

And a barrage of pieces that had been needling Will ever since he’d met Kalyn started to fall out of orbit and assemble themselves—things that had bothered him subconsciously, that had set up shop under his skin while he’d been too distracted, or unwilling, to pay them credence.

So you wanted out, he thought. *You and Jav. And you brought us along for what?* He smiled as it hit him. *Because just disappearing wasn't enough. You needed witnesses to your deaths to get the Alphas and the FBI off your backs.*

He stood in the shadow of his house, trying to fit it all together, his mind passing through bewilderment, anger, then coming to rest in a state of awe as everything at last made perfect sense. *What performances.*

They'd put his life, and his daughter's, in danger, but he'd gotten Rachael back, returned twenty-two women to their families, and for that, perhaps, he could play along.

Will hurled Javier's BlackBerry into the stone chimney, the device exploding on impact.

He walked into the backyard, stood looking through the windbreak of spruce trees into the pasture, spotted the herd of deer still scrounging the banks of the Mancos River.

He looked up at the stars in the navy December sky and wondered where Kalyn was tonight, trying to make some kind of sense of her, but like a prism, each memory gleamed from a different facet, and all he arrived at was, *Who are you?*

The FBI agent who showed up at my house, all business, on a crisp October night?

The femme fatale who kidnapped a family and interrogated an Alpha at gunpoint?

The woman who showed kindness and warmth to my motherless daughter, and sacrificed herself in the back of a semi to find her sister?

The deer had caught wind of him, six heads raised, two of them antlered, the racks the color of the moon where the moonlight struck them.

The broken woman with scarred wrists I almost made love to in a Fairbanks hotel?

Will sat down slowly in the dead grass and watched the deer evaluate his scent, lose interest, and go back to their nighttime wandering.

May you find your peace, Kalyn.

Looking over his shoulder, he could see the adobe glow of firelight on the walls inside his house and the strands of white lights that Devlin was wrapping around their pitiful spruce. It was filling him up now, this sense he'd come to the end of something, that he was turning out of a bad

corridor, though into what, he didn’t know. Just that it was someplace new, and he had his family with him.

That was more than enough.

EIGHTY

He'd been trying to catch the bartender's attention for five minutes, with no success. The club was packed, the music appalling, and all he wanted was a nightcap, something strong and classic that you didn't have to slurp out of someone's navel.

The hard bump jolted him from his annoyed reverie, and he turned, ready, but it was just a very drunk young man—twenty-one, twenty-two—holding a Corona with lime in each hand, taking full advantage of the all-inclusive amenities. He wore a baseball cap turned sideways on his head, and no shirt, for the benefit of anyone who might desire an unencumbered view of his magnificently sculpted abs.

"Watch out there, bro, 'kay?"

Javier glanced down at his boots, spilled beer foaming on the iguana skin as a surge from the dance floor pushed the college boy within range.

"Watch out? You just bumped into me," Javier said. "Why are you telling *me* to watch out?"

One of the young man's friends grabbed his arm, "Come on, Brian, I found that piece of ass we saw at the pool today."

But Brian jerked his arm away. "Nah, man, nah." His face becoming flushed with rage. "What the fuck is *your* problem, bro?" He poked a finger into Javier's chest, *cerveza* sloshing onto Javier's black silk shirt, so close now, Javier could see his pupils—booze-dilated into huge black plates.

"Nothing," Javier said.

"What?" Brian turned his head, displaying his ear to Javier in an exaggerated fashion.

"Nothing," Javier said, louder.

Brian nodded. "That's right. That's what the fuck I thought."

"What did you think?"

"What?"

"You said, 'That's what the fuck I thought.' Like you had already formed an opinion prior to my response."

“Yeah,” Brian said, pointing in his face now, “I could tell you were a little bitch and that you wouldn’t do shit.”

Javier nodded, smiling, “Very perceptive of you, Brian.”

Then he turned toward the bar, the bartender coming his way now, raised a finger to catch her attention as the college boy drifted back toward the dance floor.

He strolled the Fun Ship’s Empress Deck, the glasses pleasantly cool in his hands. Though he could still hear the bass pulse of the Christmas Eve rave at the Galax-Z dance club on the upper deck—a trip hop remix of “Silent Night”—it felt good to be walking away from that madness toward the bow.

They were thirty miles off the eastern bulge of South America, and the stars shone in clustered swarms. Farthest he’d ever been from Sonora.

He’d been planning to kill her tonight, but he figured he might as well play it safe, wait until they reached Rio. There was such joy in the anticipation.

She put her hands on the railing and leaned over the bow, the dark water six stories below, tropical air clinging to her skin like sweaty satin.

Kalyn turned at the sound of approaching footsteps. Javier passed through the illumination of a deck light and handed her a glass, Kalyn registering the sour waft of tequila.

“Patrón,” he said. “Sorry, best they had.”

They clinked glasses, stood leaning against the railing. Somewhere out in all that dark lay the coast of Brazil. They would dock in Rio de Janeiro on New Year’s Eve.

“How is Kalyn tonight?”

“All right, I guess. Missing Lucy.”

Javier sipped his tequila. “I’ve been thinking a lot about Raphael.”

“You’ll see him again.”

“I hope.”

She said, “We did a good thing, you know.”

“I’m aware.”

“Doesn’t it feel good to you?”

“I suppose.”

She looked over and smiled, thinking of that night just a year ago, when she’d finally caught up with him. He’d wanted a way out—they both had—and she’d shown him a door. Now they were standing here together at the bow of a cruise ship, en route to South America, with $425,000 between them that Javier had taken from the safe in that Alaskan lodge. He still scared her, something diamond-hard and unknowable in those blue eyes, but she liked that he scared her, and she liked his heat.

“Merry Christmas, Jav.”

“*Feliz Navidad*, Kalyn.”

The engines of the cruise ship hummed beneath them, a low, steady bass line, and Kalyn leaned over just enough so their elbows touched.

Javier said, “What are you doing?”

“This.” And she kissed him for the first time, for a long time.

When they came apart, she said, “But you know something?” The corners of her mouth and her tongue were tingling. “You still hurt my sister, you fucking psychopath.”

Javier smiled at this, but the smile faded and he stared in disbelief, watching Kalyn bend down, her knees grazing the pool of blood, and wrap her arms around his thighs.

Then she hoisted him up onto the railing, grabbed the handle of the knife she’d embedded in his gut, and pushed him into the Atlantic Ocean.

ABANDON

About ABANDON

On Christmas Day in 1893, every man, woman and child in a remote gold mining town disappeared, belongings forsaken, meals left to freeze in vacant cabins; and not a single bone was ever found. One hundred thirteen years later, two backcountry guides are hired by a history professor and his journalist daughter to lead them into the abandoned mining town so that they can learn what happened. With them is a psychic, and a paranormal photographer—as the town is rumored to be haunted. A party that tried to explore the town years ago was never heard from again. What this crew is about to discover is that twenty miles from civilization, with a blizzard bearing down, they are not alone, and the past is very much alive.

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This book is dedicated to Aidan Crouch.

Acknowledgments

It’s been a long trek to reach the end of this book, and I owe a lot of people my gratitude. Rebecca and Aidan, for sharing me with this story. It isn’t always honeydew and sugarcanes living with a writer, but you guys are troupers and you’re my people. I love you both so much. Linda Allen, for your friendship and endless support when I needed it most. Michael Homler, for pushing me in the right directions and being as much of a perfectionist as I am. Anna Cottle and Mary Alice Kier, for your priceless insight in the final stages. Joe Konrath, Gregg Hurwitz, Marcus Sakey, and Scott Phillips, great writers and greater men, who gave me diamond-hard feedback and support when things were looking insurmountable. David Morrell needs his own page, but this will have to suffice: you’re a gentleman and an inspiration and I’m blessed to know you. Everyone in my local writers group—Suzanne Tyrpak, Terry Junttonen, Doug Walker, Shannon Richardson, Dinah Swan, Cacy Alexander, Gail Harris, Nina Moats, Haz Said, and Adam Watson. Early readers: Sandi Greene, Jordan Crouch, Clay and Susan Crouch, Judy Johnston, and Anne Marquard. Sally Richardson, Andy Martin, George Witte, and Kelley Ragland for making all this possible and putting me in the best of hands. Jeroen ten Berge, for your amazing creativity and love of books. Michael Richard, Joe Foster, Duane A. Smith, Marianne Fuierer, Art Holland, Karen Sway, and Clyde Gibbs for providing answers to questions I couldn’t hunt down in books. Diane Cerafici and Beverly Coleman at Rocky Mountain PBS for tracking down the quote. Carol Edwards for your virtuoso copyediting. The awesome baristas and kickass coffee at the Steaming Bean in Durango, Colorado, where much of this book was written. And finally, group hug with the Jordans—Jon, Ruth, and Jen—thanks for having my back and for your friendship.

In the West, the past is very close. In many places, it still believes it’s the present.

—John Masters

Thursday, December 28, 1893

Wind rips through the crags a thousand feet above, nothing moving in this godforsaken town, and the mule skinner knows that something is wrong. Two miles south stands Bartholomew Packer’s mine, the Godsend, a twenty-stamp mill that should be filling this box canyon with the thudding racket of the rock crushers pulverizing ore. The sound of the stamps in operation is the sound of money being made, and only two things will stop them—Christmas and tragedy.

He dismounts his albino steed, the horse’s pinked nostrils flaring, dirty mane matted with ice. The single-rig saddle is snow-crusted as well, its leather and cloth components—the mochila and shabrack—frozen stiff. He rubs George’s neck, speaking in soft, low tones he knows will calm the animal, telling him he did a good day’s work and that a warm stable awaits with feed and fresh water.

The mule skinner opens his wallet, collects the pint of busthead he bought at a bodega in Silverton, and swallows the remaining mouthful, whiskey crashing into his empty stomach like iced fire.

He wades through waist-deep snow to the mercantile, bangs his shop-mades on the door frame. Inside, the lamps have been extinguished and the big stove squats dormant in the corner, unattended by the usual constellation of miners jawboning over coffee and tobacco. He calls for the

owner as he crosses the board floor, moving between shelves, past stacked crates and burlap sacks bulging with sugar and flour.

“Jessup? It’s Brady! You in back?”

The twelve burros crane their scrawny necks in his direction when Brady emerges from the merc. He reaches into his greatcoat, pulls out a tin of Star Navy tobacco, and shoves a chaw between lips and gums gone blackish purple in the last year.

“What the hell?” he whispers.

When he delivered supplies two weeks ago, this little mining town was bustling. Now Abandon looms listless before him in the gloom of late afternoon, streets empty, snow banked high against the unshoveled plank sidewalks, no tracks as far as he can see.

The cabins scattered across the lower slopes lie buried to their chimneys, and with not a one of them smoking, the air smells too clean.

Brady is a man at home in solitude, often spending days on the trail, alone in wild, quiet places, but this silence is all wrong—a lie. He feels menaced by it, and with each passing moment, more certain that something has happened here.

A wall of dark clouds scrapes over the peaks, and snowflakes begin to speck the sleeves of his slicker. Here comes the wind. Chimes clang together over the doorway of the merc. It will be night soon.

He makes his way up the street into the saloon, still half-expecting Joss Maddox, the beautiful barkeep, to assault him with some gloriously profane greeting. No one’s there. Not the mute piano player, not a single customer, and again, no light from the kerosene lamps, no warmth from the potbellied stove, just a half-filled glass on the pine bar, the beer frozen through.

The path to the nearest cabin lies beneath untrodden snow, and without webs, it takes five minutes to cover a hundred yards.

He pounds his gloved fist against the door, counts to sixty. The latch string hasn’t been pulled in, and despite the circumstance, he still feels like a trespasser as he steps inside uninvited.

In the dark, his eyes strain to adjust.

Around the base of a potted spruce tree, crumpled pages of newspaper clutter the dirt floor—remnants of Christmas.

Food languishes untouched on a rustic table, far too lavish to be any ordinary meal for the occupants of this cramped one-room cabin. This was

Christmas dinner.

He removes a glove, touches the ham—cold and hard as ore. A pot sits there, the beans frozen in their broth. The cake feels more like pumice than sponge, and two jagged glass stems still stand upright, the wine having frozen and shattered the crystal cups.

• • •

Outside again, back with his pack train, he shouts, turning slowly in the middle of the street so the words carry in all directions.

“Anyone here?”

His voice and the fading echo of it sound so small rising against the vast, indifferent sweep of wilderness. The sky dims. Snow falls harder. The church at the north end of town disappears in the storm.

It’s twenty-seven miles back to Silverton, and the pack train has been on the trail since before first light. The burros need rest. Having driven mules the last sixteen hours, he needs it, too, though the prospect of spending the night in Abandon, in this awful silence, unnerves him.

As he slips a boot into the stirrup, ready to take the burros down to the stables, he notices something beyond the cribs at the south end of town. He urges George forward, trots through deep powder between the false-fronted buildings, and when he sees what caught his eye, he whispers, “You old fool.”

Just a snowman scowling at him, spindly arms made of spruce branches, pinecones for teeth and eyes, garland for a crown.

He tugs the reins, turning George back toward town, and the jolt of seeing her provokes, “Lord God Amighty.”

He drops his head, tries to allay the thumping of his heart in the thin air. When he looks up again, the young girl is still there, perhaps six or seven, apparition-pale and just ten feet away, with locomotive black curls and coal eyes to match—so dark and with such scant delineation between iris and pupil, they more resemble wet stones.

“You put a fright in me,” he says. “What are you doin out here all alone?”

She backpedals.

“No, don’t be scart. I ain’t the bogeyman.” Brady alights, wades toward her through the snow. With the young girl in webs sunk only a foot in

powder, and the mule skinner to his waist, he thinks it odd to stand eye-to-eye with a child.

“You all right?” he asks. “I didn’t think there was nobody here.”

The snowflakes stand out like white confetti in the child’s hair.

“They’re all gone,” she says, no emotion, no tears, just an unaffected statement of fact.

“Even your ma and pa?”

She nods.

“Where’d they all go to? Can you show me?”

She takes another step back, reaches into her gray woolen cloak. The single-action army revolver is a heavy sidearm, and it sags comically in the child’s hand, so she holds it like a rifle. Brady is too surprised to do a thing but watch as she struggles with the hammer.

“Okay, I’ll show you,” she says, the hammer locked back, sighting him up, her small finger already in the trigger guard.

“Now hold on. Wait just a—”

“Stay still.”

“That ain’t no toy to point in someone’s direction. It’s for—”

“Killin. I know. You’ll feel better directly.”

As Brady scrambles for a way to rib up this young girl to hand him the gun, he hears its report ricocheting through the canyon, finds himself lying on his back, surrounded by a wall of snow.

In the oval of gray winter sky, the child’s face appears, looking down at him.

What in God’s—

“It made a hole in your neck.”

He attempts to tell her to stable George and the burros, see that they’re fed and watered. After all the work they put in today, they deserve at least that. Only gurgles emerge, and when he tries to breathe, his throat whistles.

She points the revolver at his face again, one eye closed, the barrel slightly quivering, a parody of aiming.

He stares up into the deluge of snowflakes, the sky already immersed in a bluish dusk that seems to deepen before his eyes, and he wonders, *Is the day really fading that fast, or am I?*

2009

1

Abigail Foster stared through the windshield at the expired parking meter. Her fingers strangled the steering wheel, knuckles blanching, hands beginning to cramp. This had all seemed like such a good idea a month ago back in New York when she'd pitched the article to Margot, her editor at *Great Outdoors*. Now, on the verge of seeing him for the first time in twenty-six years, she realized she'd done herself the disservice of glossing over this moment and the fact that she'd have to walk into that building and face him.

Her watch showed five minutes to seven, which meant it was five to five, mountain time. She'd sat in this parking space for twenty minutes, and he was probably about to leave, thinking she'd decided not to come.

The hostess showed her toward the back of the brewpub, which at five in the afternoon stood mostly empty. Peanut shells littered the floor, crunching beneath the heels of her black pumps, and the reek of brewing beer infused the air with a yeasty sourness. The hostess held the back door open and motioned to the only occupied table on the patio.

Abigail stepped outside, smoothed the Cavalli skirt she'd paid way too much for last year in Milan.

The doubt resurfaced. She shouldn't have come. No story was worth this.

He sat alone with his back to her at a west-facing table, with the town of Durango, Colorado, spread out before him in its high valley, specked with the icy yellows of cottonwood and aspen, enclosed by pine-wooded hills and bare shale hills and, farther back, the spruce forests and jagged peaks of the San Juans.

The sound of the patio door banging shut caught his attention. He looked over his shoulder, and at the sight of her, slid his chair back from the table and stood—tall, sturdy, wavy silver hair, dark blues, and dressed like something out of *Backpacker* magazine—plaid Patagonia button-up shirt tucked into a comfortable pair of jeans, Livestrong bracelet, Teva sandals.

She felt that knot constricting in her stomach again, noticed his left hand trembling. He seized the chair he'd been sitting in to steady it.

"Hi, Lawrence."

She knew he was fifty-two, but he'd aged even better than his photo on the history department's Web site indicated.

No handshake, no hug, just five seconds of what Abigail ranked as the most excruciating eye contact she'd ever held.

Easing down into a chair, she counted three empty pints on the table, wished she'd had the benefit of alcohol to steel herself for this meeting.

She rifled through her purse, found her sunglasses. It was Halloween, and though the air carried a chill, at this elevation the intensity of direct sunlight made it pleasant to sit outdoors.

"I'm glad you came," Lawrence said.

A waiter costumed as a hula dancer approached the table.

"Want a beer, Abigail?"

"Sure."

"They have a bunch of different—"

"I don't care. Something light."

He said to the waiter, "Bring her a Rock Hopped Pale."

"Right on."

The whistle of a steam-powered locomotive blew somewhere up the valley. Abigail saw the plume of smoke in the distance, heard the chugging palpitations of the valve gears as the train steamed south through the heart of town.

"I don't have any backpacking gear," she said.

"Scott will outfit you."

"Who's Scott?"

"Our guide."

The silence, uncomfortable as it came, crawled under her skin.

"Pretty town you have here."

She couldn't help thinking this didn't feel anything like she'd imagined it would. Having run countless versions of this moment through her head, they'd all carried more gravitas. She would scream at him. She'd hit him. They'd break down and cry together. He'd apologize. She'd accept. She wouldn't. Now she understood none of that would happen. They were just two people sharing a table, trying to limp through the awkwardness.

"I'm curious," she said. "All this time, and now you contact me."

"I've followed your journalism career, subscribe to all the magazines you regularly contribute to, and I thought this … expedition … might be good

fodder for your—”

“But you haven’t been interested in helping me since I was four years old.”

Lawrence slugged back the rest of his dark beer, stared at the mountains, wiped the foam from his beard.

Abigail said, “That came out more angry than—”

“No, it’s fine. You’ve got standing to be as angry as you want.”

“I’m not, though.”

The patio door opened and the waiter returned with Abigail’s pint and another round for Lawrence.

When he’d left, she raised her glass.

“Lawrence,” she said, “here’s to our past. Fuck it.”

He grinned. “That easy, huh?”

“We can pretend.”

They clinked pints and Abigail sipped her golden beer.

“So why’d you come?” Lawrence asked. “To be honest, I never expected a response to that E-mail.”

“Funny, I was just sitting out in the car, building the nerve to walk in here, and trying to answer that question for myself.”

The sun ducked behind the mountains and Abigail shivered, the rocky slopes and snowfields blushing with alpenglow.

2

At 4:30 the next morning, Abigail hurried across the parking lot of the Doubletree, moving toward a big Suburban, where four figures stood in the diseased light of a flickering streetlamp. The air was perfumed with wet sage and resonant of the jabbering Animas River, which flowed behind the hotel.

They all turned at the sound of her footsteps, her eyes gravitating first to her father, then to the man standing beside him, who came only to his shoulders. His head was smooth-shaven and his beard, just beginning to fade in, matched the gray of his deep and thoughtful eyes.

“Emmett Tozer,” he said as they shook hands. “Guess you could say we’re responsible for this outing. Lawrence was nice enough to agree to take us out, share his expertise.”

“Abigail Foster, freelance journalist.” She turned to the woman holding Emmett’s arm. “June Tozer?”

June’s face lighted up and she took Abigail’s hand in both of hers. “Pleasure to meet you, Abigail.” She stood just over five feet, with a streak of white running down the middle of her chin-length brown hair. A sweet energy seemed to exude through June’s fingers. It made Abigail’s arm tingle, as if a gentle current were passing through.

“And I’m Scott Sawyer. I own Hinterlands, Inc. I’ll be your guide for this trip.”

Abigail shook the calloused hand of the beautiful man in a Phish T-shirt and torn khakis, instantly liking what she saw, a feeling she sensed he reciprocated. He was young, his hair bleached, probably just shy of thirty, and she discerned beneath his faded clothes the body of a seasoned outdoorsman.

They rode up toward the mountains in the dark, and Abigail was dreaming again before they left the city limits of Durango.

She slept soundly, and when she woke, the Suburban was ascending a steep, rocky road. Scott and Lawrence talked in the front seat, but their conversation seemed muffled. She swallowed. Her ears popped. The sounds of the straining engine and tires crunching over rocks came rushing in. Abigail sat up, rubbed her eyes. The dashboard clock read 6:01 A.M. The

sky had lightened into dawn, and they were climbing through a canyon, the one-lane road following the path of a stream.

Scott finally pulled over onto the edge of a meadow and parked beside a dinged and rusted Bronco that had long ago ceased to be one discernible color. But despite its state of disrepair, it had somehow managed to drag a trailer up the road. Abigail climbed outside after Emmett and June, heard the chatter of a stream.

They huddled between the vehicles, their breath steaming, the air redolent of spruce.

The driver's door of the Bronco squeaked open, and a man stepped down into the frosted grass. He was tall, his beard thick save for a few bare spots, his walnut hair drawn back into a ponytail.

Scott said, "Meet Jerrod Spicer, my trustworthy assistant. He's an excellent outdoorsman, so you should know you're all in capable hands."

Jerrod let slip a yawn, said, "Sorry. Still waiting for the coffee to kick in." He walked to the back of the trailer, unlocked the doors. "Gunter, Gerald, time to go to work."

Abigail smiled when two llamas stepped down into the meadow and began munching on the grass. She approached them, reached out to pet the black one, but it pulled away, affronted by the familiarity.

"I'd rethink that, Abigail," Scott said. "Gunter spits." He opened the back hatch of the Bronco. "Now if you'll step over here, we can start getting you all fitted for your packs."

• • •

As Abigail watched Scott cinch down the llama packs, she heard a car coming up the canyon. A moment passed, and then a hunter green Ford Expedition appeared around the bend. It veered off the road and pulled up onto the meadow, a rack of sirens mounted on top, SAN JUAN COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT emblazoned on the driver's and passenger's doors. A woman climbed out and approached the group, which had gathered by the llama trailer. She was petite and pretty, with bright, friendly eyes and long brown hair split into braided pigtails.

“Morning,” she said, and tipped the brim of her Stetson. A sheriff’s star had been embroidered into her black parka. “Y’all about ready to shove off?”

“Yep,” Scott said, pulling the strap to tighten the hip belt of his pack.

The sheriff pointed to Scott, said, “I see you’re taking a fly rod. You wouldn’t mind letting me have a peek at your fishing license?”

“Not at all.” Scott walked down to the sheriff and pulled his wallet out of his fleece pants. He flipped it open. She nodded.

“Y’all look like you’re headed in for the long haul.”

June said, “Well, we’ve got a ways to go… . How far did you say, Scott?”

“Seventeen miles.”

“Yeah, a seventeen-mile hike into this old ghost—”

“What’s your name, Sheriff?” Lawrence asked. “I feel like we’ve met before.”

“Jennifer. And yours?”

“Lawrence Kendall. Get down to Durango much, Jennifer?”

“Not if I can help it.” She cocked her head. “Where’d you think we’d met?”

“I don’t remember, but you look familiar.”

“Don’t think we have, and I’m pretty good with faces.” She addressed the group: “Well, I assume you all purchased backcountry insurance.”

“They did,” Scott said. “I’m the guide. I insisted they buy it.”

“Where you taking them?”

“Grizzly Gulch.”

“I thought she said you were headed to a ghost town. There are no ruins in Grizzly Gulch, at least that I know of.” She leveled her gaze on him, unblinking.

Abigail watched Scott. His Adam’s apple rolled in his throat.

“Actually, we’re going to Abandon,” Emmett said.

Without averting her eyes from Scott, the sheriff asked, “And what are you planning to do there?”

“Take some pictures. My wife and I are paranormal photographers. Depending on what we get, we may do a show in San Francisco this winter.”

The sheriff said to Scott, “No call to lie to me if all you’re gonna do is take pictures.”

He nodded.

“That is all you’re planning on doing?”

“Of course.”

“And you’ve got the permits to visit Abandon?”

“They do.”

The sheriff looked at June and Emmett. “Could I see them, please?”

Emmett reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope, which he handed to the sheriff. She thumbed through the papers.

“Wow, a group permit. They don’t give out many of these.”

Emmett said, “We’ve been trying to score one for three years.”

The sheriff gave the envelope back but lingered a moment longer, her brown eyes passing over each member of the group as if taking some kind of mental inventory. “I hope y’all have a real safe trip,” she said, then tipped her hat again and strode back to the Expedition.

As they watched her climb in, crank the engine, and continue on up-canyon, Abigail caught something, but it was subtle, and she instantly let it go. In a day and a half, she’d remember this moment, wish to God she’d paid it more credence. What she saw was a glance between Scott and Lawrence—just two seconds of eye contact that looked something like relief.

3

They spent the first two hours climbing out of the canyon on a trail that switchbacked through a forest of old-growth Engelmann spruce. Abigail found herself near the back, between Emmett and Lawrence, trying to come to terms with the emaciated air.

At a break in the trees, she peered down and saw the road they'd taken out of Silverton, just a twisting brown thread eight hundred feet below. The sound of the stream had faded into a sustained hiss. The next time they stopped to rest, she'd lost the stream altogether and there was no wind, only the thud of her oxygen-starved heart banging in her ears.

• • •

At midday, they crossed a stretch of open country, the grasses dry and yellowed, littered with achromatic midsummer blooms of columbine, lupine, and Indian paintbrush. Abigail could see a subgroup of the San Juans—the mountains tan in direct sun, gray in the shadow of clouds, with rags of old snow high on the peaks. The sky shone neon blue.

Scott led them to the entrance of a broad valley. They came into a forest of ponderosa, plenty of space between the trees, sunlight pouring onto the pine-needle floor of the forest. As they climbed, the occasional spruce appeared among the ponderosa. The pines dwindled. Then they moved through a pure stand of spruce again. Abigail realized they hadn't been following a trail since breakfast.

• • •

In the early afternoon, they arrived at a small lake, and Scott told everyone to shed their packs. Abigail leaned hers against a rotten stump. Without the weight, she felt like she might float away. She knelt down on the shore and splashed water in her face. The arctic shock of it stole her breath. She sat on the grassy bank and drank from her water bottle. Tall spruce trees rimmed the bank, and the surface of the lake sent back a perfect reflection of the trees and the sky. The water glowed a deep green. She looked through it down to the lakebed, saw a cutthroat motionless among the pastel-colored stones.

Jerrod came over and brought her a bagged lunch—sandwich, apple, Clif Bar.

“How you holding up?” he asked.

“Feel like I’m breathing through a straw, and my hips hurt from the pack.”

“I’ll adjust the straps again before we leave. You’re doing very well.”

She shielded her face from the sun and looked up at Jerrod. She liked his face. She could tell that beneath the beard he was handsome, taller than Scott, even more well-built. But she wondered about the scars, two bare patches curving up from the corners of his mouth in the shape of crescent moons. Staring at him, she wished she could see his eyes again. They seemed different—she’d noticed it at the trailhead before the sun came up and drove everyone into sunglasses. They reminded her of something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, their density and depth, like they bore some great burden beyond the intake of the present.

Jerrod left to take Emmett and June their lunches. Abigail unwrapped her peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich. She ate, watching the llamas graze the bank.

• • •

They made camp at eleven thousand feet in a glade just spacious enough to accommodate five tents. They were only a few hundred feet below the timberline and the forest had transitioned into a withered-looking collection of blue spruce and alpine fir, crippled by years of extreme winters. Scott insisted that everyone change out of their wet clothes to avoid hypothermia. Within half an hour, they raised the tents. The guides showed everyone how to inflate the Therm-a-Rests and arrange their gear inside the vestibules.

• • •

With still a few hours of light left, Abigail emerged from her tent, bundled in long underwear, fleece pants, a vest and parka. Emmett and June stood watching Jerrod construct a campfire ring from a pile of rocks. Lawrence snored in his tent. Scott dug through a giant compression bag filled with what Abigail could only hope was real food, not that granola-bar shit.

She walked up to him, said, “I need to use the ladies’ room. What do we do about that?”

“I haven’t unpacked the toilet yet.”

“Really? You have a portable—” His grin stopped her.

“You’ve never spent a night out in the woods have you, Abigail?”

“No.”

“Well, no worries. There’s a bathroom behind every tree.”

She smiled seductively and raised her middle finger.

• • •

Abigail found a bit of privacy behind a blue spruce. The air nipped her bare ass. The ground steamed. She glanced at her watch—6:30 P.M., still on Manhattan time, and it made her homesick to think of Viv and Jen. Any other Sunday, she’d have just finished working out and showering, in a mad rush to meet them for cosmos at the Zinc Bar. But so far, this trip had been nothing like she’d expected. The thin air, the cold, ten fucking miles, and the hardest still to come. She thought she’d be in her element out here, but she hated everything—the Clif Bars, the smelly, bitchy llamas. And there was something about the light beginning to fade and no warm bed to climb into that depressed the hell out of her. *I’m a city girl. If there was ever a question.* While she squatted there, she gazed back down the valley. That open country they’d crossed several hours ago lay golden in the late-afternoon sun, and as she pulled up her pants, she saw it. A few miles below, perhaps at the lake where they’d stopped for lunch, a column of smoke rose out of the forest. As she walked back toward their campsite, she felt glad to have seen it, relieved to know they weren’t completely alone out here.

4

Abigail leaned against a fir tree. Down in the gully, Scott worked his way upstream, just past a fork in the channel. She watched him sidearm cast, the bright green line sailing in an S over the rocks, glistening like a spiderweb in the late sunlight, delivering the fly into a small pool. He'd hiked up his fleece pants, and he fished shirtless in a fly vest, knee-deep in the water. Abigail descended quietly to the bank, stood for a while listening to the stream's drowsy prattling.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said without looking back. "But there's a secret to it."

"What's that?"

"Not caring." He suddenly raised the rod. It dipped. A trout shot out of the pool and splashed into the main current, Scott holding the rod high now, the line taut, the bamboo arcing toward the water. He brought the fish out of the stream, a twelve-inch cutthroat, its crimson gill slashes palpitating in the fading light. Scott carefully unhooked the fly, then swung the fish against a rock. It shivered out. He slipped it into a canvas bag.

She said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you jerk on the rod before it moved?"

"Yeah. I'm impressed you noticed. See, by the time you feel the tap, it's too late. He's already checked it out, realized it's bullshit."

"So how'd you know?"

"Caught him rising to my elk-hair caddis, saw it vanish, pulled to set the hook."

"No idea what you just said, but it was a lovely thing to watch."

Scott climbed onto the bank, sat down on a carpet of moss. He opened a small box containing an assortment of flies, Abigail now close enough to read the tattoo that wrapped around his arm above the bicep:

MARIA 2.11.78-5.15.04 R.I.P.

She bent down to the stream, cupped a handful of freezing water, and as she brought it to her mouth, Scott yelled, "No!"

She glanced back at him, letting the water run through her fingers.

“Notice something about the rocks along the bank below the fork?” he asked.

“You mean how they’re covered with orange algae?”

“That’s not algae. It’s a mineral deposit, a visual marker for streams with high metal content—zinc, aluminum, lead.”

“So this water’s toxic?”

“Yep. That’s why I’m fishing upstream from that tributary. It probably runs out of an old mine.” He lifted the rod. “So, you wanna give it a shot? See if you can hook one?”

Five minutes later, they stood casting together, Abigail thinking this was like those cheesy scenes in the movies when the guy shows the girl how to work a pool cue. But she didn’t care. As their arms moved together, his body against hers, she thought of her recent string of New York men—beautiful metrosexual train wrecks. Scott didn’t strike her as one of those superficial predators she always seemed to be falling for, and for the first time since leaving New York, she didn’t want to be home.

• • •

They sat around a fire, eating trout that had been seasoned with fresh spices and seared on a stone among the embers. There was vegetable soup and a baguette, and over the flames, Lawrence roasted whole green chilies stuffed with cheese. He’d also smuggled in a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon. They all agreed—one of the best meals they’d ever had.

After supper, everyone washed their dishes in the stream until their hands had gone numb in the icy water. By the time they returned to the fire, Jerrod had stoked the flames into a big blaze. Abigail leaned back in her camp chair, noting the ache in her legs, the blisters on her hips. When she looked up, she saw the cinders rising out of the flames and through the spruce branches toward the night sky.

Lawrence pulled a flask from the pocket of his fleece jacket and offered it to June. She unscrewed the cap, took a swig, passed it to her husband.

A cloud of smoke gathered around Scott’s head, and he asked, “Anyone else want dessert?”

The whiskey burned Abigail’s throat. She took another sip, sent up a prayer of thanks when the glow settled in, dulling the pain ten hard miles had inflicted on her body.

Lawrence got stoned and slipped into his professorial tone, going on about the history of the ghost town, even reading from the diary of someone who'd lived in Abandon, a woman named Gloria Curtice. But Abigail was too beat, and her mind wandered for the next half hour, only perking up when he told the story of the vanishing, how a man had ridden into Abandon in January of 1894 in search of his missing younger brother, a mule skinner named Brady Sykes, only to find the town empty, not a chimney smoking, the stamp mill silent.

"I'm not talking about empty homes where people packed all their belongings and left. This town of a hundred and twenty-three souls just up and disappeared on Christmas Day."

Emmett asked, "So what happened to the mule skinner's brother?"

Lawrence expelled a lungful of smoke. "Did what any of us would've done. Hauled ass out of there. Few days later, he did an interview with the *Silverton Standard and Miner.* Said the whole ordeal had really spooked him, that the town felt strange, haunted, like the devil had been there. Everyone assumed they'd find the remains of Abandon in the summer, when the snow was gone, but they never recovered a single bone."

"That's fucked-up," Scott said.

"So what do you think happened, Lawrence?" Emmett asked.

"To the town?"

"Yeah."

The professor sighed, seemed to reflect on the question for a moment, then said confidentially, "I've never shared this with anyone"—Emmett and June imperceptibly leaned forward—"but I think a big spaceship came down, abducted the whole lot of them."

"Really?"

Lawrence smiled.

"Oh, a joke," Emmett said.

"Sorry, but you have to understand—I've been asked what happened to Abandon probably a thousand times, and I just don't know the answer. There are some loony-tunes out there who believe the town was taken by aliens or that something supernatural happened."

"What about a virus?" June asked.

"Bad ones were around in the 1890s, but lead poisoning would've been a greater threat to Abandon than an epidemic, what with their drinking water

flowing out of the heart of these mountains. But assuming some super-virus struck the town, where are the remains? In the absence of any bones, I guess I can see how a person might look to supernatural explanations."

"Even you?" Emmett said.

"In all honesty, I do have a theory, but it's, well, personal, and I haven't shared it with anyone ever, and don't plan to now."

Scott stood, took the water bag hanging from a knob on a tree, and doused the fire.

It hissed, bellows of steam lifting into the trees, cold rushing in.

"Sorry, folks, but tomorrow comes early."

The others said their good nights and lumbered off to bed. Then just Abigail and Lawrence sat across from each other in the darkness.

She got up as soon as she realized it, said, "Night."

Lawrence stared at the last unyielding coal, scratching his gray beard.

"Sit out here with me awhile," he said without looking up.

"I would, really, but I'm cold and tired."

"Abigail."

"What?"

"I just wanted to—"

"I know, but I can't do this right now, okay? I'm not there yet."

Their campsite glade stood fifty yards through the trees. Abigail had to pee again, but the thought of squatting out here in the dark seemed worse than the pressure in her bladder. She climbed into her one-man tent, her sleeping bag freezing. She crawled inside the down bag and zipped herself up, pulled her long black hair into a ponytail. It reeked of wood smoke. The walk from the campfire to the tent had set her pulse racing, and she listened to the throbbing in her head. When it eased, the hush came. Even on weekends in New York, lying in bed in her studio apartment, the nearest thing to silence contained the noise of sirens and central heating, her refrigerator cutting on and off in the predawn hours. Here, the silence was a vacuum, a total absence. It made her uneasy.

With no threat of rain or snow, the guides hadn't stretched the rain flies over the tents. The ceiling of Abigail's was mesh. She reached up, unzipped it. A section of the ceiling fell away and she gasped. Through the opening lay a rectangle of night like none she'd ever seen, powdered with stars that dimmed and brightened, so the entire sky seemed to smolder with the

embers of a cosmic fire. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen stars, had no idea of their profusion.

Footsteps swished through the grass nearby—her father stumbling to bed—and as Abigail lay there on the brink of sleep, she puzzled at this life he’d fashioned for himself. He’d certainly aged well, but she wondered if he was happy, what kind of friends he kept, what sort of women he’d been with. Prior to coming to Colorado, she’d finally Googled him, but aside from a brief bio on the Fort Lewis College Web site, Lawrence’s Internet presence was light.

Exhaustion set in, her sleeping bag warm, her ears detecting the murmur of the stream.

Nine meteors flared across her skylight before she succumbed to sleep, and despite all the campfire talk of the vanishing of Abandon, there existed no greater mystery for her than the man who snored twenty feet away, alone in his tent.

5

Abigail opened her eyes. A film of ice had formed on her sleeping bag where her breath had misted and frozen during the night. She could hear some of the others stirring in their tents and, farther away, the crackling of what she hoped was a fire.

She laced her boots and climbed outside—8:23 A.M. by her watch, which meant 6:23 here. A heavy frost had blanched the tents and meadow grasses. The llamas grazed nearby. The air tickled her throat going down.

She relieved herself behind her favorite blue spruce, then made her way through the trees to the fire. Only Jerrod was up. He handed her a mug steaming with coffee.

"Take it with anything?"

"Black is bliss."

The coffee tasted strong and rich. She stood close to the flames, watching Jerrod light another camp stove. His long hair was down. While the water heated, he poured packets of oatmeal into plastic bowls and mixed in dried fruit and chocolate chips.

"Where's Scott?" Abigail asked.

"Helping Emmett. He started throwing up around three this morning. Probably altitude sickness. Scott's giving him some more Diamox right now. Making sure he stays hydrated. Emmett'll be okay. This kind of thing usually clears up pretty quick."

"Can I help with anything?"

He glanced up at her, their eyes connecting.

"No, I've got it. Thanks, though." Jerrod peeled two bananas and began to slice them into the oatmeal with a Swiss army knife. As Abigail watched him prepare their breakfast, she noticed the dog tags dangling from a chain around his neck.

Within the hour, they broke camp, Emmett weak but on the mend, the guides having distributed the weight of his pack between them. As they climbed, the firs grew scrawnier, these dwarfed banner trees limbless on the windward side.

The forest dwindled into alpine tundra—shrubs, grass, and rock crusted with black and yellow lichen.

They proceeded in a tight line, Scott and the llamas leading, Jerrod bringing up the rear.

Now well above timberline, rock walls ramped up steeply on either side.

They climbed a boulder field toward the pass. No grass, only large broken rocks that shifted under their weight, filling the upper regions of the cirque with a strange tinkling. Some had been gouged with potholes, filled with standing water. Black spiders scampered under their boots.

Abigail was thinking how these mountains reminded her of Gothic cathedrals, with their towers and chimneys, when somewhere high above, a boulder dislodged, dividing into pieces as it plunged toward them.

Scott yelled, “Everybody down! Shield your heads with your packs!”

They all crouched as the rocks hurtled toward them, bouncing and breaking and multiplying. Abigail shut her eyes and she whispered, “Please, please, please.”

Most of the rocks shattered against a bus-size boulder just fifteen feet away.

Silence returned. The air smelled of cordite.

Scott called out, “Everybody in one piece?”

Abigail looked up, Jerrod beside her, his eyes still closed, teeth gritted, body quaking.

• • •

The boulder field steepened near the pass. Abigail used her hands to climb now, the weight of the pack disrupting her balance, feeling envious of the llamas’ surefootedness.

They came to a series of ledges.

“Take your time!” Scott yelled. “This section is very sketchy, and the rock’s rotten. If you start to freak out, let us know. We’ll talk you through it. Focus on what’s above you, and don’t look in the direction you don’t want to go. Namely, down.”

The ledges ranged in width from four to six feet, contouring up the rock face. Abigail focused on putting one foot in front of the other and dragging her left hand along the rock to maintain her balance. The others had gotten ahead of her.

At the third switchback, she made the mistake of glancing down, had no idea they’d climbed so high above the boulder field, the exposure

overwhelming, waves of dizziness engulfing her, filling her stomach with razor-winged butterflies.

Her knees weakened. The world tilted. She stumbled toward the edge.

Jerrod grabbed her arm, pulled her back.

She crumpled down on the ledge.

“Abigail.”

“I can’t breathe,” she gasped.

Jerrod knelt in front of her. “You’re okay. You’re just hyperventilating. Close your eyes and take deep breaths.”

She did what he said. Soon, the dizziness had passed and she could open her eyes without the world spinning.

“You saved my ass,” she said as Jerrod pulled a climbing rope out of his pack. “What’s that for?”

“I’m gonna short-rope us together until we reach the top. Can you stand up now?”

Abigail got to her feet and Jerrod reached around her from behind and began to wrap the rope around her thighs into a makeshift harness.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

“Sure.” He cinched the rope around her waist.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“Were you in Iraq?”

He stopped midway through his knot, turned her around so they faced each other.

“Yeah, actually. How’d you know?” His voice had tightened.

Abigail looked back over the boulder field at the glint of the lake where they’d stopped the previous afternoon. “Your dog tags,” she said.

“Oh, right.”

Other things, too. Especially the way you reacted when the rock fell. A couple years back, she’d written a piece for the *Times* about soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder, interviewed dozens of vets with PTSD. No question, he had it. She saw the damage in his eyes.

• • •

At noon they crested Sawblade Pass, just a wind-ravaged thirteen-thousand-foot notch in a cirque of spires, ridden with old snow, sun-cupped

and brittle as salt crystals.

They dropped their gear, took shelter from the wind.

From Abigail's vantage point, she could see down the other side of the pass—a two-thousand-foot drop into a box canyon. At the close end, she thought she saw the ruins of a mine. Farther on, perhaps a mile away, rows of dark specks peppered the timberline forest.

Emmett yelled, "Dr. Kendall!"

Lawrence had been exploring a recess in the rock at the end of a nearby ledge. He poked his head out. Emmett waved him over and Lawrence came and squatted beside him.

"What are those specks down there?" he asked.

"That's Abandon."

Abigail took out her cell phone. It roamed for a moment, got a signal.

She called her mother to tell her how beautiful it all was.

6

They spent the next hour descending a talus slope, and by two in the afternoon, they had reached the remains of the Godsend, Bartholomew Packer's mine. The stamp mill looked to be one winter away from collapsing. Boards bowed and splayed out on all sides, and amid the wreckage of the mill stood one of its indomitable cast-iron rock crushers.

They followed an old wagon trail as clouds filed in from the west. Pockets of snow clung high up the canyon walls and snowmelt bled out from them in streams down the rock face and into the ruts of the trail, making their boots squish in the mud.

Ahead lay a grassy lane, lined with rows of weather-beaten structures—all that was left of Abandon. Main Street ran for two hundred yards down the middle of the canyon, and the party walked six abreast between the false-fronted buildings. Many had collapsed. Lawrence pointed to a structure with six little balconies.

"This was Abandon's red-light district. Those were the cribs. Prostitutes would stand on the balconies and try to entice potential customers who were passing by."

"How'd this town get its name?" June asked.

"It was originally named Hope by Bart Packer, but as a joke, one of the better-read miners, who was none too fond of this high, remote canyon, started calling the town Abandon. Name stuck."

"What's that?" Emmett asked, motioning to a building across the street that had long since collapsed. "See that big metal thing in there?"

Lawrence walked over and peered into the rubble.

"This was the assay office. Assayer would evaluate samples for prospectors and the mine, tell you if your ore was high-# or low-grade. That hulk of metal is probably the furnace. Bet if you poked around in there, you'd find some old crucibles, too."

They passed the blacksmith's shop, identifiable only by the anvil sitting amid the rotten boards, then the dance hall and the general store, where a faded sign had fallen onto the porch. It read ESPECIAL ATTENTION GIVEN TO THE COMFORT OF LADIES. Lawrence pointed out the drugstore, meat market,

bakery, and harness shop, though they resembled little more than board heaps to Abigail.

Midway through Abandon, he stopped them in the street. “Most important place in town.” He gestured to a building whose entire frame slanted to the right. “The saloon,” he said, eyes lighting up. Abigail was thinking how in his element Lawrence was, thrilling people with what had happened in the past. She felt envious of the childlike joy he’d found in his career, wanted a little of that for herself. “I have to tell you about the woman who was tending bar in 1893. Name was Jocelyn Maddox. She was drop-dead gorgeous, sassy, and a black widow.

“By twenty-five, she’d been married three times to rich men, all of whom had died mysteriously. Her last husband’s family got wise, proved she’d slowly poisoned him with arsenic. She fled Arizona, ended up, of all places, here. Made a big impression. Men loved her. She was one of the guys—funny, raucous, horribly profane.

“In November of 1893, someone came prospecting from Arizona, recognized Jocelyn, and reported to Sheriff Curtice that there was a murdering fugitive tending bar in his town. The story checked out and Ezekiel had no choice but to arrest her.

“Everything had been arranged to extradite her back to be hanged, but the snows came. It was decided she’d winter in Abandon, be transported to Arizona in the spring. Since half the town was in love with her, instead of just letting Jocelyn rot in jail, they chained her up in the saloon, with a deputy to keep watch, and let her go on tending bar. Of course, she never had her reckoning in Arizona. Jocelyn vanished with everyone else that Christmas Day.”

They walked to the entrance of town, where the buildings ended. Off in the distance, set up on a slope in the spruce, stood a church. Its roof had caved in everywhere except in front, where a tiny bell tower dangled in the rafters. Atop the tower, a crooked cross stood silhouetted against the darkening sky.

June stopped.

“Honey?” Emmett said. “What is it?”

“Nothing, just … very similar energy to Roanoke Island.”

“What’s that?” Abigail asked.

“The Lost Colony, that settlement that vanished from the North Carolina coast in the late 1500s, where the only thing left behind was CRO carved into a tree. People thought CRO meant the Croatan Indians, that maybe there’d been an attack. We did some work out there a few years ago. Energy’s even stronger here.”

“What kind of energy?” Abigail asked.

June turned toward her, and those eyes that had seemed so kind just the day before at their first meeting in Durango had taken on a disturbing intensity. “Something awful happened in this place.”

Abigail couldn’t stop the smile from escaping.

“What?” June asked.

“I’m sorry.” She chuckled.

“Oh, we have a skeptic.”

“ ’Fraid so. Look, it’s nothing against—”

Emmett said, “No, least you’re up-front about it. I respect that. Most people just patronize us and pretend to play along. But since you are writing an article about what we do, I hope you’ll keep an open mind.”

“You have my word.”

• • •

They camped on the edge of town. Abigail climbed into her tent and fell asleep, and when she woke, it was evening and cold. She found a pair of gloves in the top compartment of her pack and crawled outside. Low, dark clouds scudded across the peaks. She saw Scott lying in the grass with the llamas, listening to a radio. Lawrence was sitting in the open doorway of his tent, thumbing through a tattered notebook by the light of his headlamp.

As Jerrod fed a piece of clapboard into the flames, she sat down across from him in the grass.

“Jerrod?” she said. He glanced up. “You think it’s a load of shit?”

“What?”

She cocked her head toward Emmett and June, who were a little ways off, on their knees, facing the ghost town, heads bowed in meditative poses.

“I don’t know. They aren’t quite as kooky as I imagined they’d be.”

Abigail pulled off her gloves and extended her hands toward the flames.

In the distance, the outline of Abandon formed an eerie profile in the dusk.

Scott walked over, followed by Lawrence and the Tozers.

“What’s up?” Jerrod asked.

“I was just listening to the latest report on my weather radio… . Doesn’t look good.”

“You’re kidding,” Lawrence said.

“This early-season storm was supposed to plow through New Mexico, and now the track is farther north. Not particularly cold, but it should be all snow above nine thousand feet. As you know, Abandon sits at eleven.”

“How much they predicting?” Lawrence asked.

“One to three feet. Winter storm warnings are already up. Supposed to start late tonight.”

“So what does this mean?” June asked.

“Means we should pack up our shit and make a beeline for the trailhead.”

Jerrod looked up. “You aren’t serious.”

“Actually, I am.”

“Hike back in the dark?”

“Maybe we get only halfway. Be better than postholing all seventeen miles in a meter of powder.”

“You don’t know that it’s gonna be that bad.”

“Don’t know that it isn’t.”

Jerrod looked at Emmett. “You paid a hefty chunk to come out here and shoot this town, have Lawrence give you the rundown—”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Scott asked.

“I’m talking to our client. Maybe he should make the—”

“*My* client. Don’t know if you forgot, but you work for me, bro.”

Emmett said, “We have to leave?”

“If this storm really winds up,” Scott said, “hiking out will be a bitch. We didn’t bring snowshoes or skis. You ever tried to walk in three feet of snow?”

“Let them decide, Scott,” Jerrod said.

Scott shot him a glare, then turned back to the Tozers.

“Look, I suggest we get the hell out of here, but if you want to stay, see what happens, I guess that’s an option. What do you think, Lawrence?”

“Their dime, their permit, their choice.”

Emmett glanced at his wife, then back at Scott. “This is our last chance to shoot Abandon this year?”

“Yeah, it’s late in the season and a miracle there’s not more snow already. We don’t do it now, you won’t be able to get back here until next June or even July, depending on how bad the winter is. And that’s assuming you get another permit.”

Emmett said, “Honey?”

In the silence, Abigail watched dark billowy clouds spilling over the top of the canyon, sweeping down into the ghost town like an avalanche.

June looked at her husband, nodded.

“We’ll take our chances,” he said as Abandon vanished in the fog.

1893

7

Bartholomew Packer pushed open the door and stepped out of the storm. He brushed the snow from his wool overcoat, hung his derby on the coatrack. The floorboards creaked under the substantial load as he waddled toward the potbellied stove.

While his fingers thawed, he surveyed Abandon's only remaining saloon. The light was poor. It disseminated in a smoky dimness from three kerosene lamps suspended from the ceiling, never reaching the corners of what was little more than a thin-walled shack.

There were only four of them in the saloon tonight. He saw Lana Hartman across the room, seated at the upright piano by the front window, playing "O Little Town of Bethlehem." She was always here, as much a part of the place as the bar stools. He'd never seen her in this dress—dark green, with red piping on the collar and cuffs.

Jocelyn Maddox sat on a stool behind the bar, watching Lana play, a cigarette burning in her hand, eyes glazed with boredom.

The young deputy tasked with guarding her had passed out in a chair beside the stove. A raging high lonesome, he snored, a line of tobacco-colored drool creeping down his chin.

Bart stepped to the bar, said, "Evening, Joss. Lively tonight."

"Merry Christmas, you big fuckin walrus. Come to wet your dry?" She smiled and hopped off the chair, dressed tonight, as always, like a man—high-back canvas trousers and a cotton dress shirt with suspenders. The disparity between her masculine outfits and the pitch-black hair that fell in waves down her back and the dark liquid pools of her big eyes drove men mad. She looked Spanish, exotic. The chain between her leg irons dragged across the floor as she set up a glass and uncorked a bottle of whiskey, poured Bart a full tumbler.

"I'm afraid you're drinking with me tonight," he said.

"That so?"

"Reckon Miss Hartman would hoist a glass with our ilk?"

"I never seen her take a drink," Joss said, "and as you well know, many a man, present company included, have sent a whiskey over to that piano."

"How about our man by the stove?"

Joss's dark eyes cut to the sleeping deputy, then back to Bart.

"Let that coffee cooler alone," she whispered. "And keep it down. He sees me drinkin, I'll hear about it all fuckin night."

She got a glass for herself, and when she'd filled it, Bart raised his, said, "Joss, here's how. May the coming year—"

"For Chrissakes." She swallowed her whiskey—one long, deliberate tilting of the glass. Bart drained his. She poured again.

"Joss, love, wish you could've seen Abandon when it was a roaring camp. In '89, night like this, there'd of been fifty men here, miners coming off shift, card games, whole flock of whores."

"It's all over now, huh?"

"Yeah. All over. All gone. The whores, the opium, the fun." He clinked his glass against hers and they drank. He replenished their tumblers and they drank and he refilled them again. Soon his face had flushed and gone blotchy and the burst capillaries stood out like tiny red worms, so that his nose resembled a rotting strawberry. Lines of sweat rolled down the dome of his great bald head.

Bart was not a man to stand when there were chairs on the premises. He installed himself on a bar stool and he and Joss worked their way through the bottle while Lana played Christmas carols and the deputy snored. He said things he'd already said ten times before on nights just as quiet, about the town in its heyday, the art of following a rich vein deep into a mountain, and how he meant to close the mill next year and make a new fortune in Montana.

"Hey, how 'bout shuttin the fuck up for a spell? You're makin my head hurt."

Bart attended to his whiskey. Looking through the window behind the bar, he could see it snowing harder than before. The walls strained against the wind.

After awhile, he got up, staggered over to the piano. He stood beside Lana, watching the spill of her blond hair, her tiny gloved fingers moving across the keys. The piano had been out of tune ever since a miner had shot it two years ago in a fight, mistaking it for an adversary. When she'd finished the song, he said, "That was very pleasant, Miss Hartman," and reached into his pocket. He withdrew a burlap sack that fit in his palm and placed it on the piano.

Lana picked up the sack, her hand dipping with the weight. She untied the string and peeked inside, saw the dull gleam of dust and tiny slugs, probably two hundred dollars' worth.

She looked up at Bart and shook her head.

"Oh no, it has been my greatest joy this year to watch you play. You're too good for this deadfall." He started to lay his hand on her shoulder but then stopped himself. He'd never touched her. Instead, he allowed himself a long drink of what he thought was far and away the softest face ever to grace the streets of Abandon.

Bart returned to his seat at the bar. "One more for the cold road home," he said, and Joss poured the last of the bottle into his tumbler. Lana had begun to play again.

When he finished his whiskey, Bart dropped another poke on the bar. "And a merry Christmas to you, Joss," he said. She weighed the sack in her hand, as if it might not serve, then smiled and leaned across the bar.

"You love her, don't you?" she whispered.

"Excuse me?"

"You're a seldom fuckin hombre. Come in here ever goddamn night, skip your own Christmas shindig just to listen to her bang—"

"Well, that don't mean—"

"Calm the fuck down, Bartholomew, and listen. You never know when it's your time. Mine's comin in the spring, and I guess this is just the long way around the barn a sayin I hope you won't leave this world with any regret."

"I don't understand what you—"

"Before you hive off, do what you been meanin to ever since you laid eyes on that filly."

"What in hell are you—"

"I want you to kiss her."

"I couldn't."

"What's the worst she'll do? Slap you? I'm sure you been slapped plenty. Hell, you ever tried somethin like that on me, I'd fuckin shoot you, but that's neither here nor there. I reckon you love her, and this is my Christmas gift to you. Kiss her on your way out."

Bart stepped down off the stool and walked toward the door. He put on his overcoat and his hat and reached for the doorknob.

He stopped. He walked back to the piano. His weak heart pounding, he leaned down and kissed Lana on the cheek.

She stopped playing and bowed her head. They both trembled.

“I apologize,” Bart said. “It’s just that …”

He hurried outside and shut the door.

Lana took a deep breath, then looked out the window, up to the second floor of the hotel across the street, at the woman sitting in the bay window.

You could hear the noise from the dance hall down the street, where most of the town had gathered for Christmas Eve. She started “Silent Night” on the discordant keys.

Joss took a candle out from under the bar, went over to the stove, opened it, and held the wick to a flame. She set the burning candle in the windowsill behind the bar, stood there watching torrents of snow fall through the darkness, wondering if they could see her signal in the blizzard.

8

Stephen Cole buttoned his black frock coat and stepped onto the musicians' platform, tall, pale, thin to the brink of fragility. His brown hair, parted down the middle, fell in greasy strings to his shoulders, and the only facial hair he could grow was a lean mustache more befitting a teenager than a twenty-seven-year-old man. It wasn't the snipe-gutted appearance people noticed, however, but his large eyes—brown, gentle, occasionally radiant.

"Let us pray," he said. "Dear Lord. Redeemer. Maker of all that is good. We thank You for the bounty of that which we are about to eat, for the hands that prepared it, for the generous Mr. Packer, who allowed his boarding-house cooks to make this feast for the town. We thank You for Your perfect and loving Son, Jesus Christ, Who You sent to save this despicable world. Let us remember the Child born in a manger as we celebrate His birth this night and on the morrow.

"Finally, dear Lord, I ask that You pour out Your protection upon Abandon. Protect us from the cold and snow, the deadly slides, the beasts of the mountains, the heathens, and, above all, from the wickedness in our own hearts. Kyrie eleison. Amen." As Stephen stepped down from the stage, the fiddlers took up their instruments and plucked at the strings, turning the tiny hardwood pegs.

Two years ago, this hurdy-gurdy would have been lined with whores of every make and model in threadbare peignoirs, bright stockings, some only children, others topless, a handful naked entirely, all painted up like lewd clowns, and the miners staggering drunk through the horde of dancers, the room redolent of a foul ambrosia—whiskey, sweat, and tobacco smoke commingling.

But the mine had pinched out, the revelers departed, though their nights in the dance hall stood memorialized in the bullet-holed walls, stains of vomit, tobacco juice, and blood on the floorboards.

This night, half a dozen tables had been arranged in the center of the room, decorated with ribbon, spruce saplings cut from the hillsides above town, and a whole multitude of candles.

Ezekiel and Gloria Curtice sat at the end of the table nearest the sheet-iron stove, a silence descending as the residents of Abandon filled their plates from the pans of corn bread, vegetables, fried potatoes, sop, and whole roasts. The hanging lamps did little to illumine the hall, the faces an indistinct canvas for shadow and candlelight. Gloria sat across from Harriet McCabe, watching the little girl devour her supper, dripping sauce on her white pinafore.

"Are you ready for Santa Claus?" Gloria said. "I hear he's on his way to Abandon this hour." Harriet glanced at her mother, as if to confirm the validity of the claim. Tears slid down Bessie McCabe's face. "Bessie?" Gloria whispered. "What is it? Are you poorly?"

Barely twenty, Bessie's pink cotton work dress was her best, stained and torn across the front from countless trips to the woodpile, hardly warm enough for a Rocky Mountain winter. Bessie had come from Tennessee ten months ago to join her husband, found him quite changed from the fifteen-year-old boy she'd married. She carried the dull burn of poverty in her eyes, and the stress of living this high in the dead of winter, with a man losing his mind, was causing her straw-colored hair to fall out in clumps.

"It's Billy," Bessie whispered, covering her mouth with her hand to mask rotten teeth.

Gloria reached across the table and held Bessie's hand. "Where is he?"

"Where you reckon?" Bessie's voice broke on the last word.

"With Mr. Wallace?"

"Sometimes, I suspect they go to the cribs."

"Mr. McCabe loves you," Gloria said, then felt a pinch under the table.

She turned and met her husband's disapproving eyes.

"So, Mrs. McCabe," Ezekiel said, "how's Mr. McCabe finding his job at the mine?"

"Still just a mucker, but him and Mr. Wallace been dirt washin on Billy's day off. Lookin for someone to grubstake 'em."

"Well, here's hoping he sees some color in his pan." He raised his glass of water, and when he'd taken a sip, turned his attention to the little girl. As he quizzed Harriet on her studies, Gloria nibbled on a piece of corn bread and stole glances at her husband. She was still wildly in love with him, this solid, gorgeous man with a thick mustache, long sideburns, and the most ardent eyes she'd ever seen, especially when in a state of passion—anger or

otherwise—as if there were lava at his core. She'd convinced him to wear his four-button sack coat for the occasion, an outfit he despised, and which, in his words, made him look like "a feathered-out got-damn banker."

At length, Gloria's attention drifted away from their table, and she picked out pieces of other conversations about towns that were booming, towns that were busting. As she eavesdropped, she noticed the table closest to the musicians' platform. Ten people occupied one side, but at the far end, a woman ate by herself, completely ignored. She estimated the woman to be in her mid-forties, and even from across the room, Gloria could tell that she'd been striking years ago. Now she just looked tired, ragged out in a burgundy bustle ball dress with white lace at the ends of the sleeves and intricate beading of a style fashionable in the seventies.

"Would you excuse me?" Before Ezekiel could reply, she was on her way, stopping finally across the table from the woman in the outdated dress. "May I sit here, Rosalyn?" Gloria asked. The woman smirked, her hair pinned up in a mass of garnet curls, her cheeks rouged.

"If you don't care what all these hypocrites think, I sure don't." As Gloria set her food on the table and pulled out the chair, she couldn't help but note the thrill of hearing a woman speak her true mind again.

In proximity, Gloria saw that the woman was even more striking but even more ruined. It broke her heart. She thought of her mother, what she might have become had the syphilis not claimed her. "How are you likin the—"

"I don't do pity too well. What possessed you to come over here?"

"I seen you around."

"So've half the men in this room. And they feign outrage that I dare partake of this feast in their presence, laughing up their sleeves. You know I used to be *loved* in this town? Like royalty."

"Look, I just saw you were alone."

"Well, you done your good deed, so why don't you head back over—" Rosalyn stopped herself, reached out, touched the long blanched scar under Gloria's bottom lip. "Where'd you work, honey?"

Gloria flushed, took a sip of water. "I don't … anymore."

"I said when you did."

"Leadville."

Rosalyn smiled. "Hell of a place. You're stunning. Bet the men loved you. What happened to your chin?"

“I had a customer who went insane. Thought we were married, and that I was cheatin on him.”

Rosalyn laughed out loud. Heads turned.

“This town’s in high water,” Gloria said. “Don’t mind my asking, why’ve you stayed? Thought you might’ve gone to Cripple Creek.”

Rosalyn smiled, wisdom and a lifetime of buried rage in her eyes. “Been a whore all my life. I’ll finish out in Abandon and, when it goes, take what money I got, go somewhere where nobody knows me. Where it don’t snow. Buy a house. Tend a garden.”

“Marriage?”

“I’m afraid man’s a species that’s been ruined for me.”

Gloria sliced through a piece of roast.

“How’d you become so respectable?” Rosalyn asked.

“Fell in love with a good man.”

“Not many a those left, are there?”

• • •

Now they Black Hawk waltzed, the fiddlers sawing away, the clack of high-top lace-ups and stovepipe boots slamming the floorboards. Looking over her husband’s shoulder, Gloria saw Rosalyn sitting by herself in a rocking chair beside the stove.

“It’s shameful,” she said to him.

“You know who that woman is?” Ezekiel spoke into his wife’s ear.

“Wipe that feature off your face. She’s a human being.”

“Would you have people unriddle your past?”

“Would you have people treat me like I didn’t exist?”

They bumped into the Ilgs. “Excuse us, Sawbones.”

“Merry Christmas, Sheriff. Look at you in full war paint. Ma’am.” The doctor doffed his bowler.

When they’d broken from the crowd, Ezekiel said, “That woman ain’t my concern.”

“Is decent human behavior? You’re gonna dance with her.”

“Damn if I will.”

“Zeke!”

He glanced over her shoulder, whispered, “God bless that man.”

Gloria turned, saw Rosalyn rise to accept the hand of Stephen Cole. Soon the preacher and the whore were stomping together.

9

Ezekiel and Gloria walked down the plank sidewalk. It had been shoveled that morning, but a foot and a half of powder had fallen since then. Gloria tucked her gloved hands under the wool of her hooded cape. Aside from the ruckus of the dance hall, Abandon stood in that kind of mad silence that set in during the worst of blizzards. There appeared to be no one else out, and the snow fell so hard, they could see only the nearest streetlamp. Beyond lay only faint suggestions of lantern light.

They arrived at the entrance to the hotel, the door starred with snowballs—the handiwork of bored children. Across the street, there was light in the saloon and they could hear the sound of Christmas carols being played on a broken piano. They entered the dark lobby. There hadn't been anyone at the front desk since the owner had left town three months ago. Gloria brushed the snow off her cape and followed Ezekiel up the staircase.

The corridor was empty, completely dark. They stopped at number six, the only room with light sliding under the door.

Ezekiel knocked. They waited. He knocked again.

"I don't reckon she's gonna answer," Gloria whispered.

"Mrs. Madsen," Ezekiel said through the door. "It's Zeke and Glori Curtice. We're leaving something for you. Merry Christmas."

Gloria set the basket on the floor. It contained two oranges, a can of sardines, and a piece of chocolate cake from the town feast. On a scrap of parchment, Gloria had written, "Merry Christmas and a happy New Year from your friends the Curtices."

They went back outside and trudged on through the snow.

"Saw Oatha Wallace today," Ezekiel said. "He was in the benzinery this morning. Told him my brother's over two months short now."

"What'd he say?"

"What he says every time. That Nathan and the others decided not to go last minute, since the weather looked ominous. I called him a black liar."

"What do you think happened?"

"Don't know, Glori, it's past me, but that man's bad medicine. Snaky."

"What if it turns out Nathan was with him?"

“I may be sheriff, but it won’t be settled in no goddamn court a law.” They turned onto a side street and followed a path beaten down in the snow, saw families huddled before fireplaces in those cabins on the hillside that were still inhabited—tiny islands of warmth and light in the storm.

“Need to warn you, Ezekiel,” she said. “I wanna say something about our little whistle.”

Ezekiel stopped, faced his wife. It was so dark outside, he could only make out the whites of her eyes.

“Told you. We don’t talk about it.” The tremor in his voice was grief, not anger, and it made Gloria’s throat tighten.

“I just need to say something, Zeke. You don’t got to talk—”

He grabbed her arms. “Said I don’t wanna hear it.”

“But I need you to,” she said, and her eyes burned as they flooded. “I can’t go on tonight and tomorrow pretending it’s like it’s always been. Only been a year, and I miss him. That’s all I wanted to say. That I miss Gus so much, I can’t breathe when I think about him.” Her husband’s eyes went wide. He turned away from her, his nose running. “I’m empty, Zeke, ’cause we don’t talk about him. That don’t make nothing better. Just makes us forget, and do you wanna forget your son?”

Ezekiel sat in the snow. “I ain’t forgot Gus. Ain’t nothin in this whole goddamn world make me forget my boy.”

She knelt behind him, Ezekiel wiping his face and cursing.

“You reckon we’ll see Gus again when we die?”

“Glori, if I believed that, I’d a blowed my goddamn head off a year ago. This is above my bend. Why you doin this to me?”

“ ’Cause I don’t remember what he looks like! He’s just a blur in my head. Remember that day I wanted to get our picture made and you wouldn’t?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, goddamn you for that, Zeke.”

The wind had changed directions and the snow needled Gloria’s face. She turned her back to the barrage of ice. Ezekiel was saying something, but she couldn’t hear. She moved forward, their faces inches apart. She asked him what he’d said.

“Said he came halfway above my knee. Close your eyes, Glori, maybe you can see him. His hair was fine, color a rust, and his skin so white, we

used to say it looked like milk. He had your eyes.” Ezekiel cleared his throat and wiped his face again. “And when I … Jesus … when I kissed his neck, my mustache would tickle him and he’d laugh so hard, scream, ‘No, Papa!’ ”

Gloria had closed her eyes. “Keep going, Zeke.”

“And he called my knee his horsey, and he named it Benjamin.”

Ezekiel had stopped. Gloria opened her eyes. Her husband was shaking. He leaned forward into her cape and wept.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s all right.”

“Naw, it ain’t,” he said. “I lie in bed sometimes and try to picture what Gus would a looked like at ten or fifteen or thirty. I imagine him turned out a man. We was robbed, Glori. It ain’t never gonna be all right again.”

Ezekiel picked himself up and then lifted Gloria in his arms, both covered in snow. She bawled as Ezekiel carried her up the hill toward their dark cabin in the grove of spruce.

10

Bart Packer glided through the darkness in his sleigh, the whisper of the runners drowned out by the clinking of chain loops and the singletree groaning in the cold. A half mile south of town, and with the snow blowing in every direction, he could hardly see beyond the horses.

He'd have missed it, but the horses knew the way, making the turn just past the grouping of snow-loaded firs. They pulled the sled up a series of switchbacks and after awhile slowed to a walk, their legs punching through the snow, their nostrils flaring like bellows, Bart slapping the reins against their rumps, hollering, "Get up there! Go on, girls!" They climbed several hundred feet above the floor of the box canyon. The trail leveled out. "Now get on!" he yelled, and he worked the reins furiously until the horses trotted in the powder.

He wasn't rushing them out of meanness or impatience. Nothing riled Bart like the mistreatment of horses, but they were approaching the most dangerous section of the ride home, where the trail passed through a gap between steep slopes that produced slides every winter. If caught in an avalanche tonight, he'd have almost no chance of survival.

When the sled had passed safely through the gap, Bart drew up the reins and brought the horses to a halt. He stepped down into the snow. It rose to his waist. He unfastened an ax from the side of the sleigh and waded over to a pool of ice the size of a wagon wheel. He hacked at the mouth of the spring, chipping away the ice until he could see water flowing down the rock. He let the horses blow. While they drank, he climbed into the sleigh and pulled a flask from a pocket of his wool overcoat, then leaned back, wrapped in the buffalo robe, sipping brandy, listening to the pair of horses slurp the icy water.

Maybe it was the alcohol, but he imagined his lips tingled from their contact with Miss Hartman. He replayed the kiss. Why had he waited so long? *Cause of your pride, man. Your fucking pride.*

The horses lifted their heads and neighed. They backed away from the spring and stomped their hooves. Bart grabbed up the reins.

"What is it, girls?" His first thought was they'd sensed a slide. He peered up, listening for the rumble of snow raging down through the darkness

above him, heard only the horses nervously clicking their teeth on the steel bits. He took a final swig of brandy, stuffed the flask into his coat, and had just lifted the reins to put his team into motion when one of the horses snorted.

Bart cocked his head, strained to listen. He heard the whoosh of animals struggling through deep snow. Two riders appeared twenty feet up the trail, their horses buried to their stomachs. It occurred to Bart that they resembled phantoms in the snow.

He blinked, half-expecting them to have vanished when his eyes opened, but they were still there, and close enough that he could see the clouds of vapor pluming from their horses' nostrils.

"Evening!" Bart called out. There was no answer, and he thought maybe they hadn't heard him, so he yelled, "Merry Christmas!" The rider on the left said something to his companion, and Bart heard the click of tongues. The riders came up on either side of the sleigh. They wore wide-brimmed hats topped with several inches of snow, had draped themselves in blankets and wrapped their faces in pieces of a torn muslin shirt, so that Bart could only see their eyes. Those belonging to the rider on his left exuded a cold focus. The other pair of eyes were wide and twitching with fear and nerves.

"Merry Christmas," Bart said, more cheer in his voice than he felt, and wondered if he was facing a couple of road agents. "Hell of a storm. Ain't on the prod. Just trying to get my ass to a fire—"

"I'd appreciate you shuttin that fuckin hole in your face." The rider on the left had spoken, his voice low, metallic.

Bart said, "Sir, I'm sorry, I don't understand what the problem—" The business end of a double-barreled scattergun peeked out from under the rider's blanket. "You shoot that gun, sir, you're liable to bring a slide down on us all."

"Didn't you hear what he said?" Bart looked at the rider on his right. He was smaller than his partner, much younger, barely a man, if that. But what struck Bart was his accent. Pure Tennessee.

"I don't understand," Bart said. "You work for me, son."

The boy's eyes darted to his companion, then back to Bart.

"N-n-n-n-not no more I don't, Mr. Packer." Bart saw the six-shot Colt patent revolver trembling in the boy's hand, a huge sidearm, decades old, a relic from before the war.

“Easy son,” Bart said, and though his intoxication had faded fast, he was far from clearheaded. He thought for a half second that maybe he’d been caught in a slide and was lying packed in snow, suffocating, hallucinating this nightmare. “What in holy hell are you doing? I don’t under—” The other man put his horse forward and rammed the barrel of the shotgun into Bart’s face. Blood poured through his mustache, between his teeth, down his chin.

Bart pulled off a glove and cupped his hand over his nose.

“Goddamn you, it’s broke!”

“Now go on and drive the sled up to your mansion. We gonna follow behind. Don’t know if you got a shoulder scabbard, but I wouldn’t advise reachin into your coat for any reason. Rest assured I’ll err on the side a blowin your goddamn head off. Savvy?”

“What do you want? I’m a rich—”

“You remember what happened last time you opened that mouth? Now go on.” Bart lifted the reins and urged his team up the trail, his nose burning, tears running down his bloodied face. The riders followed close behind, and they hadn’t gone fifty feet when one of them retched into the snow.

The other muttered, “Christ Almighty.” Bart didn’t dare look back, but he figured it was the boy, wondered if he’d gotten sick because he was going to kill his first man tonight.

11

It was almost ten o’clock, and Joss figured she’d seen all the customers she was going to see for the evening. But in no hurry to return to her cold jail cell, she didn’t disturb the deputy, who still snoozed comfortably beside the stove.

Lana had gone home for the night, and Joss hated to own up, but she missed the piano, sick as she was of the endless rotation of Christmas carols. Noise drowned out the hush of loneliness, though even loneliness was preferable to listening to that deputy blather on about what big shit he used to be down in Ouray. Joss had given serious consideration to cutting the young man’s throat while he slept—one deep swipe with the bowie she kept under the bar. She could picture his eyes popping open, him reaching for the revolver that she’d already slipped out of its holster, the puddle of blood expanding on the floorboards, sizzling where it touched the base of the stove. But that would just fuck everything up. Besides, where would she go, with Abandon as snowbound as she’d ever seen it? What was another twelve hours?

Joss smiled at the thought of Lana. On her way out, she’d actually bowed her head and mouthed “Merry Christmas”—by far the most verbose that pretty mute had ever been.

The front door swung open and the preacher walked inside and dusted the snow off his frock coat. Stephen Cole glanced around the dead saloon, then walked up and rested his forearms on the pine bar.

“Good evening,” he said.

“Evenin, Preach. Finally come to bend a elbow?”

Stephen smiled. Apparently, he’d left home without a hat, because his hair was wet with melting snow.

“Could I buy you a drink, Miss Maddox?”

“It’s Joss, and yes, always. You off your feed?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“You’re all gant up, just about the palest thing I ever saw.” She placed a new bottle on the bar, withdrew the cork, and set up two tumblers. “Pinch a cocaine with your whiskey?”

“No thank you.”

“Don’t reckon I ever got booze-blind with a man a God. Here’s to you—is it Reverend or Preacher or—”

“Stephen is fine, actually. Just Stephen.”

They clinked and drained their glasses, Stephen wincing.

Joss went to pour again, but Stephen waved her off. “No more of that snakehead for me, but you go right ahead.”

“I’ll mix you a cobbler.” She smiled. “Ladies seem to like it.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m gonna get a little more fine.”

Joss filled her glass. The preacher pulled two bits from his leather pouch, set it on the bar, but he made no move to leave.

“There somethin else I can help you with?” she asked.

Stephen pushed his hair behind his ears.

“Actually, I did have ulterior motives for coming here tonight.”

“And what might those—no, wait. Please, please, tell me you ain’t here to make some half-assed attempt to—”

“Save you? No. God saves. I am a very small part of that equation. Besides, it would be an insult to your intelligence for me to think I can convince you of your need for God. You’re a smart woman. You’ve lived many a year in this world and have certainly heard the Gospel at some point. You’ve chosen not to accept Him. It saddens me, certainly saddens God, but you have free will. I respect that.”

“Well, that’s a relief to hear. I didn’t relish the idea a throwin a Gospel sharp out on his ass, but I was prepared to.”

Stephen smiled. “I understand you’re to be sent back to Arizona in the spring to …”

“To be hanged. You ain’t gonna hurt my feelings sayin it.”

“Miss Maddox. Joss. I was walking home tonight from the Christmas Eve dinner, and I saw the lamps glowin in your saloon, and God put it on my heart to come in here.”

“He did.”

“I would like to pray for you, Joss. Right now. It’s Christmas Eve. You’re chained up behind a bar. I can’t imagine the fear you face at having to go back to Arizona next year. I thought I might say a prayer with you. If it could bring you any comfort at all, I would be most—”

Joss leaned toward Stephen. “You think I rejected God?”

“I just—”

“You said *I* had chosen not to come to God.”

“I just assumed—”

“You wanna hear a story about rejection? The cunt bitch who birthed me abandoned me in a alley in the California goldfields when I was a day old. Man who found and raised me put me up for three dollars to any son of a bitch who had a taste for ten-year-old pussy. Ever husband I ever had beat me. Now the way I figure it, God either approved or couldn’t be bothered to give a shit, so *don’t* come in here talkin to me about *my* rejection a God. I’d say He’s had His back to me ever since I took my first breath.” A vein had risen on Joss’s forehead and her big black eyes shone.

“You think God hates you?” Stephen asked.

“I stopped caring what He thinks or don’t think a me years ago.”

“Well, I can assure you that He loves—”

“Look, you don’t gotta come down here, hat in hand, makin amends for God. He knows where I live. He can come Hisself or not at all. Thanks for the gesture, Preach, but you’re barkin at a knot, and prayin with you ain’t exactly on my wish list this year. Now, I gotta close up.” She looked at the deputy. “Al! Get your ass up!”

The deputy startled into consciousness, instinctively touched the revolver at his side, his words slurring. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“We’re done for tonight,” Joss said. “Take me back to jail.”

“But it ain’t but—”

“Al, goddamn it, contradict me one more fuckin—”

“All right, Joss, you ain’t gotta yell.”

Stephen took a step back and regarded Joss with his sad, sweet eyes.

“Merry Christmas to you,” he said, and started for the door.

• • •

Stephen Cole stood under a streetlamp, watching the wind build snowdrifts against the storefront of a vacated barbershop. Across the street, on the second floor of the hotel, Molly Madsen sat in the bay window, looking down at him, her face weakly illuminated by the candle in her hands. He waved, whispered a prayer for her.

He followed the plank sidewalk for several blocks, then turned up the side street that led to his cabin.

His mind brimmed with thoughts of his home in Charleston, South Carolina—the palm trees and live oaks and saltwater marshes, the ocean at sunrise, the faces of his father and mother.

He had come west three years ago because he believed it to be the will of God, had felt compelled to minister to those who lived in these harsh environs.

What he had found were a thousand little towns high in the Rockies, built upon debauchery and greed.

I've accomplished nothing, *he thought.* God, show me one life in these mountains that has benefited from my presence.

Overcome, he knelt in the empty street and prayed until his face had gone numb and his body shook with cold.

Stephen rose to his feet and wiped the snow from his hair.

He'd taken two steps toward home when he heard it.

He froze. Forgot that he was cold. Forgot his loneliness.

He just stood there in the darkness and falling snow, a strange warmth spreading through him. Having now heard it, he knew with certainty that all the other times, kneeling at the foot of his bed, sometimes hours in the silence, had been imagination and hoping.

It was simply his own name that he'd heard, but it filled him with such blinding peace that he didn't question for a moment the source.

When God speaks to you, His voice is unmistakable.

2009

12

Six tubes of light swung through the fog that had settled in the canyon—a colony of headlamps moving toward the ruins of Abandon. The air carried the steel smell of snow, though none was yet falling. Night had arrived moonless and overcast, with a darkness Abigail had never imagined possible out-of-doors, like they'd all been locked into an immense, freezing closet. She walked between Emmett and June, with Lawrence a few yards ahead, the two guides relegated to the back, with orders to stay close but quiet. Abigail had brought along her tape recorder and was collecting background information from the Tozers when Lawrence said, "Hold up!" They stopped. Lawrence shone his flashlight into the darkness ahead, the beam passing over a grove of spruce. "Can't believe I found it in this fog. Here's what's left of the cabin of Ezekiel and Gloria Curtice."

Abigail followed June into the grove. The small woman, swallowed in a red ski jacket, aimed her light at the rubble. Abigail saw a cookstove, cans, rusted bedsprings amid the detritus. Emmett slipped off his camera's lens cap and began to circle the homestead.

Abigail said, "June, while Emmett's taking photos, could you tell me how you two got involved with paranormal photography?"

June led Abigail away from the remains of the cabin. They stood apart from the others, separated by a lightning-fried spruce, headlamps off. "Ten years ago, our son, Tyler, was out riding his bicycle in the neighborhood. He was hit by a van. Died in the street." Abigail found June's hands in the dark. "Night after the funeral, Emmett and I were in bed, holding each other. We were talking about taking some pills. It's a pain like you cannot …

"So we're in bed, it's two or three in the morning, and all of a sudden, I just feel this calm engulf me, like the rush of some incredible drug. The air was thick, a living thing, and I felt like I was being wrapped in it. That's the only way I know how to describe it. Most intense and unconditional love I've ever felt, and I was smiling, and I looked at Emmett, and he was, too. We were experiencing it together, and we both knew exactly what it was. Ty had come to us. I felt my little boy's presence just as strong as I feel you

standing here in front of me, even though I can't see you. He saved us, Abigail.

"Next morning at our local coffeehouse, Emmett saw a poster for a paranormal-photography slide show. We didn't even know there was such a thing, but having just had our experience with Ty, we felt this conviction to go. Unfortunately, the photographer we went to see was a fraud. I could tell that right away. Most people who claim to be psychic are delusional. The stuff they shoot, it's camera malfunctions, flash problems, dust particles on the film. But Emmett and I were inspired to buy a camera. We shot four rolls in our room that night—infrared film in total darkness. In the corner above our bed, we captured this fantastic pool of light, like this energy was watching over us as we slept."

"Your son."

"Emmett and I had always been artists. It's why we lived in San Francisco. We threw ourselves into paranormal photography, never looked back. And it's such a beautiful medium—a perfect intersection of art and history and service."

"What do you mean by 'service'?"

"See, it isn't just about taking photographs of paranormal activity for the aesthetic value. These are suffering spirits who, for whatever reason, haven't passed to the other side. Most important part of our job is helping them move on. It's not about the thrills for us, or 'ghost-busting.' It's our calling. If Ty hadn't died, we probably never would have come down this road. Isn't it beautiful and sad how these things work out?"

June placed something in Abigail's hand—a small plastic cylinder.

"What's this?"

"Emmett shot a roll of film on the hike in."

"Of me?"

"Of you and Lawrence."

"Well, that's … Thank you, but to be honest, I don't know that I want this."

June squeezed her hands. "Do as you see fit."

• • •

When Emmett finished shooting the Curtice homestead, the party moved on, six pairs of boots brushing through dry autumn weeds. They came down

a slope, Abigail feeling guilty, convinced the death of the Tozers' son had turned them out of their minds, yet knowing their story would make the heartbreaking core of her article.

Shapes took form out of the fog. They stood in the grassy lane, Abandon's ramshackle buildings on either side, tendrils of mist drifting among them through the blaring silence.

"Let's start in the saloon," Emmett said, and Lawrence led them across the street, hopped over a few planks—all that remained of the sidewalk—and stepped gingerly into the shack.

"I haven't been in here in awhile," he said, "so I'm not sure how sturdy everything is. We'd better just start with the Tozers going in."

Emmett and June joined Lawrence inside. After a moment, Emmett appeared in the doorway, said, "Would everyone please turn off their headlamps? I don't want any outside light getting in here, interfering with the shots."

All the headlamps went dark except for Emmett's. Abigail stood on the threshold, watching them explore the interior, the beam of Emmett's light grazing the listing walls and a gnawed-board floor, littered with pieces of broken whiskey bottles, rusted tin-can scraps. The pine bar had toppled over and punched out a section of the back wall, through which the fog crept in, giving the saloon a natural smokiness.

"You can come on in," Lawrence whispered to Abigail. "Just be mindful where you step and don't go near the stove. If you look up, you'll see a hole in the roof. The boards underneath get rained and snowed on. Amazing they haven't fallen through yet."

Abigail walked inside, the floor bowing beneath her weight. It smelled of mold and marmot urine and whatever the fog had carried in from the canyon. Emmett and June stood together by the wall opposite the potbellied stove, near an upright piano, half of the ivory keys missing, the rest cracked and jagged, like broken teeth.

Emmett turned off his headlamp, the darkness filling with the click of exposures.

While he shot the saloon, Abigail whispered to June, "Are these spirits ever—"

"Mean?" June laughed. "We get that question a lot. In all our years of work, we've encountered only one aggressive spirit. Ninety-nine percent of

the time, they're just confused, lost, and consumed in their own grief. It's funny, because once you're dead, all the beliefs you subscribed to while alive don't mean a thing."

Abigail turned on her tape recorder. "Tell me about this aggressive experience."

"Few years ago, we got a call to clear a church outside Monterey. This spirit had been locking doors, moving furniture around, just making a nuisance of itself. So we showed up, and the preacher was there. This hard-core, fire-and-brimstone type of guy. He said, 'You tell me when you feel the presence, and I'll get rid of it, show you how it's done.' I told him, 'Well, it's here right now,' and he said, 'By the power of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave.' A chair went flying across the sanctuary, shattered on the pulpit. That preacher ran out the doors. Scared the hell out of him. He quit the church and everything."

"What do you think it was? A demon? Do you even believe in angels and demons?"

"Angels, yes. Demons … I'm not sure. Come to find out, this church had been converted from a nursing home. This spirit was probably tied up from whatever trauma it had experienced there when it was alive. But it certainly didn't like the church."

"How do you think it managed to throw a chair?"

Emmett piped up from across the room: "These spirits, when they die, become pure mind. You know what we could do if we had access to even eighty percent of our brain?"

"You talking about telekinesis?

"That's right."

"Have to say, I'm surprised by the lack of equipment you guys brought. I did some research before I flew out, expected to see you using thermal scanners and—"

"Geiger counters, ion detectors, an EMF alarm. Let me tell you something," Emmett said. "That's a bunch of garbage. All you need is a camera and film, because if you can't walk into a room and feel it in your bones, you're in the wrong business, wasting your time."

When Emmett turned on his headlamp, Abigail noticed that June had been drawn over to one of the windows, where she stared at something across the street.

“Lawrence,” June whispered. “What happened up there?” They all walked over, peered up to where June pointed. Without light, they could barely make out a bay window on the second floor of a building across the street. “Did something happen in that room?”

“Not that I know of. It was just one of the nicer rooms in the hotel. Why?”

“Someone’s watching me from that window.” Even though she knew it wasn’t real, a subtle chill moved down through the vertebrae of Abigail’s spine.

“Can you get us up there?” Emmett asked.

“Never been, but we can certainly try.”

13

One hundred and nineteen years of rain, snow, and high-altitude sun had bleached the block letters on the side of the building, so all that could be seen by the light of the headlamps was a faint OTEL. Excluding Bartholomew Packer's mansion, it was the largest, most resilient structure in the ghost town, a two-story brick building with what had once been a lavish dining room on the ground level and seven suites on the second floor. The middle of the three rooms that faced the street was the "Presidential Suite," identifiable by the large bay window that loomed over the entrance to the hotel.

Lawrence walked through the tall door frame, the others following, and soon the party had gathered in the lobby, a long but narrow room with two archways opposite each other, a front desk, and a wide staircase that ascended into darkness.

"This was the only brick building in Abandon," Lawrence said, "built when the mine was still producing and people thought this town was going to last." Abigail stepped through the archway on her left, her headlamp sweeping over the shambles of a lounge strewn with Victorian-style furniture and a long-dormant hearth. Draperies hung in shreds from the windows, and a billiard table stood at a severe slant, one of its legs having snapped off.

Abigail drew in a quick shot of oxygen.

Eyes shone back at her, illumined in the beam—the head and rack of an enormous elk, fallen from its mount above the fireplace, stared at her, mottled with mold and decay.

She returned to the lobby, where everyone had gathered at the other archway, this one opening into the dining room. It might have been the best restaurant in Abandon in the early 1890s, but tonight it lay before them in a mass of mangled tables and broken chairs. The three chandeliers had pulled out from their fixtures in the ceiling and shattered on the black-and-white-striped hardwood floor, the tiny shards of glass and crystal glittering under the lamps, as if the party had stumbled into an ice cave.

"Anyone care for a glass of hundred-year-old bourbon?" The headlamps converged on Scott, who stood behind the mahogany bar, a dusty bottle in

one hand.

They made their way back through the carnage of furniture into the lobby.

“Here’s the deal,” Lawrence said. “I’ve never explored the second floor, so we’re gonna take these stairs one person at a time. Be alert, be careful, and walk softly if you can.”

His right hand glided up the rickety banister as he climbed. The first four steps were fine, but they grew progressively creakier the higher he went. The last three made no sound at all, and then he stood at the top, just a moon of yellow light fifteen feet above.

“Who’s next?”

June went up, followed by Emmett. Abigail took the path Emmett had chosen, straight up the middle, her headlamp trained on each step.

“You’re doing great,” June called out as the fifth step creaked loudly and she felt the wood give beneath her. The next three were even worse. She could feel her pulse accelerating and a shortness of breath brought on by the first stage of panic. Abigail climbed the final steps faster than she should have, but as she neared the top, Lawrence and Emmett reached down, each taking an arm, and pulled her to safety.

“That was sort of terrifying,” she said.

Abigail stood with Lawrence at the edge of the steps, watching their guide ascend. He climbed toward them, a model of patience and confidence, a man at home on dangerous terrain, even when he crossed the noisiest steps.

He was almost to the top now, and Abigail could see him grinning. He winked at her as he put his weight onto the last step. Then came a dry crack, and he simply disappeared.

The staircase collapsed in a fanfare of splitting wood, dust everywhere, people shouting in the darkness. Coughing, Abigail aimed her headlamp down toward the lobby, half-expecting to see Scott sprawled across the wreckage.

At first, she mistook it for a cry of pain, but then she saw the gloved fingers gripping the edge of the second floor and realized that Scott was laughing, even as his feet dangled seven feet above the fallen staircase.

“He’s right here!” she yelled. “Help him up!”

Lawrence and Emmett dropped to their knees, grabbed Scott’s arms above the elbows.

“Maybe I should just drop,” Scott said. “It’s not that far.”

“Bad idea,” Abigail said. “I see nails sticking out of the boards underneath you.”

“Abigail,” Lawrence said, “my grip’s slipping! Get him under this arm!” They strained to lift him, inch by inch, sweating, groaning, swearing. Finally, Scott’s knees cleared the ledge where the staircase had broken away and they all fell back into the corridor.

Jerrod yelled up to them, “Everybody in one piece?”

“Yeah, we’re cool,” Scott said. “Why don’t you come stand underneath us. I’ve got rope in my pack. We’ll hoist you up.”

“I think I’ll just wait down here.”

Lawrence helped Abigail and June onto their feet, and soon they were all moving down the second-floor corridor, testing with each step the fidelity of the floor. At last, Lawrence stopped at a closed door with a tarnished number 6 hanging upside down from a rusty nail.

14

The five of them filed in, their headlamps making swaths of light across the room, showing where the gingham wallpaper had peeled so thoroughly from the walls, it resembled the curling bark of aspen trees. Aside from the broken bedposts and an upturned writing desk, the furniture had been well preserved. Water had damaged the ceiling and the south wall, and picture frames lay on the floor, their canvases gone or destroyed.

On the door frame, Abigail's headlamp fell upon some tiny scrawl that she wrote off as graffiti: *Something awful happening.*

"Honey, can you get over the heaviness?" Emmett said.

"I know. It's much colder in here. Room's really sagging."

"Why are certain places paranormal hot spots?" Abigail whispered.

"Usually because of intense, unresolved emotion," Emmett said.

June had wandered over to an enormous wardrobe, which she opened. Inside hung petticoats and evening gowns, so eaten by time, they'd have evaporated in a gust of wind.

In a corner near the bed, Abigail gazed at a collection of porcelain figurines on top of a bureau, wondering how they'd remained untouched all these years. Beside them, facedown, lay a small frame, its picture gone.

Lawrence came up behind her, whispered, "Do *you* feel anything in here?"

"Loads of bullshit."

They turned and watched June approach the bay window, where, remarkably, only one pane of glass had been busted out. A divan stood in utter disintegration in the alcove.

"She'd sit here," June said quietly, as if to herself, "watching the world go by without her." She crumpled down on the floor and rested her head between her knees. After awhile, she rose into child's pose and bowed her head.

Abigail muttered "Jesus Christ" under her breath.

Emmett walked over to Abigail and Lawrence. "You really don't know anything about the history of this room? Even the smallest detail might help."

Lawrence shook his head. “I’m sorry. I know a lot about Abandon, but there are gaps.”

“Why don’t you two go ahead and turn off your lights. I’m gonna take some photos.” They all turned off their headlamps. The room went dark, Emmett just a shadow now, quiet save for the floor creaking beneath his footfalls, the clicking of his camera, and the deep rhythmic breaths June emitted as she knelt motionless before the bay window. Abigail’s eyes had just begun to adjust to the darkness when Emmett finished.

“I can’t wait to process this film,” he whispered. “I think I got something.”

“What kind of camera are you using?” Abigail asked. “I’ll need to get all the technical information right for my article.”

“This is a Minolta X-700. Only reason I use the older stuff is because it doesn’t have all the electronic hardware, so it doesn’t fool with the film. Infrared is so sensitive, you can’t even shoot it in most of the newer cameras.”

“Now, what exactly is infrared? It keys off hot and cold, right?”

“No, infrared is just outside the visible spectrum of light, so our eyes can’t see it.”

“She hears a church bell,” June whispered. “She watches them all move past, but she won’t leave.”

“Any special lens?”

“This is a twenty-eight-seventy. Sometimes, I’ll use a fifty-millimeter, depending on the conditions. Here, take a look.” He lifted the strap over his neck and handed the camera to Abigail. She brought the viewfinder up to her left eye.

“I can’t see anything.”

“Lawrence, turn on your flashlight.” Lawrence flicked it on. “Cool, it’s red,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s the number twenty-five filter.”

June got up suddenly and went back to the open wardrobe, began fingering one of the evening gowns, her face still radiating a blank, trancelike intensity. With June out of the way, Abigail took the opportunity to walk over to the bay window. From the vantage point, she could see down through old glass onto the street below.

She lifted Emmett’s camera and stared through the viewfinder.

“Lawrence, can you give me some light, please?”

He came over and shined his flashlight at the saloon across the street.

“You know, I want to apologize, Emmett,” Lawrence said. “For fucking with you last night about the spaceship and Abandon.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, I was being a dick. Let me share with you my theory on what happened.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Now, I’d have been laughed out of academia if I’d ever published this.”

Where the beam passed, the night glowed in deep reds, and Abigail suddenly knew she would write about this moment, what it felt like to gaze into the viewfinder, through the number twenty-five filter, searching for lost spirits in the sea of red. Maybe Emmett wasn’t actually looking for spirits when he snapped his photos, but she could embellish. Make his whole bizarre profession sound sexy and strange. She had the first inkling that this could be a phenomenal piece.

“But because of the way the town disappeared—everything abruptly abandoned, no record of what happened, no bones …”

Something stepped out of the saloon and ran up the street. She lowered the camera.

“I came to the conclusion that—”

“Lawrence, you see that?”

“What?”

Emmett came over. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Something just came out of the saloon and ran up the street.”

“Probably a deer,” said Scott, who’d been leaning against the wall by the door, quietly observing. “Tons of wildlife out—”

“It didn’t move like a deer.”

“How’d it move?”

“Like a man. You didn’t see it, Lawrence? It moved right through where you were shining the flashlight.”

“I didn’t see a thing.”

Abigail handed Emmett his camera and walked through the suite and out the open door, moving quickly down the hallway to where the staircase had previously merged with the second floor.

“Hey!” she called down into the dark lobby.

Jerrod had extinguished his headlamp. Abigail turned hers on, directing her light across the collapsed staircase, to the front desk, where he’d been standing several minutes ago.

“Did you see something out there? …” Her words trailed into silence.

She swept her beam of light at each archway.

“Jerrod?” she called out. A shadow moved down the corridor toward her. “Scott?”

“Yeah.”

“Jerrod left.”

Scott came and stood beside her, flipped on his headlamp, moved his light across the lobby. “Jerrod!” he yelled, then cupped his mouth, shouted again, “Jerrod! *Where’d you go?”* Abigail heard the others emerge from the suite.

“What’s wrong?” June asked as they approached.

“Jerrod’s gone.”

The five remaining members of the party peered down into the lobby, listening.

Lawrence finally said, “You think something happened?”

Scott knelt down, unzipped his backpack, and dug out a climbing rope.

“I’ll see what’s going on.” Standing there, watching Scott unspool the rope, Abigail realized the soberness in his voice unnerved her. He jogged into the nearest suite, wrapped the rope three times around a heavy chest of drawers, and tied a knot. Then he came back out into the corridor and kicked the pile of rope. It dropped fifteen feet into the lobby. He got onto his knees, worked himself over the edge, his gloved hands gripping the rope. He slid carefully down onto the wrecked staircase.

“If you guys just want to wait up there, I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Hold up,” Lawrence said. “I’ll go with you.”

The older man didn’t make lowering himself look as effortless as the guide had, but he got down safely, and the two men disappeared out the front door of the hotel.

June, Emmett, and Abigail sat down in the corridor.

“I hope everything’s all right,” June said.

Emmett looked over at Abigail. “You got extra batteries for your light?”

“Back at camp. Why?”

“Yours is dying.”
Abigail pulled off her headlamp just in time to watch the bulb fade out.

15

Abigail pressed the light feature on her watch: 9:59 P.M.

“They’ve been out there ten minutes,” she whispered.

June and Emmett had turned off their headlamps to conserve the batteries, so all she could see of them were the white pairs of facing crescent moons that framed their irises.

From one of the rooms on the second floor came a sound like a shutter slamming against a window frame.

Emmett said, “Wind.”

They sat awhile longer in the corridor, listening to the shutter squeak on its rusted hinges and bang into the window. Finally, Emmett struggled to his feet.

“Okay. I’m gonna go down and see what’s going on here.”

“No,” Abigail said. “We’ll all go.”

June went first, Emmett and Abigail helping her to ease over the edge, her hands trembling as she cursed quietly to herself while her feet dangled above the lobby. She slid slowly down the rope and whispered “Thank you, God” as her feet touched the staircase.

When Emmett and Abigail had lowered themselves into the lobby, the three worked their way over the staircase debris, past the front desk, to the hotel entrance.

They moved through the threshold and out into the misty street.

The loose shutter had gone quiet, and Abandon stood in perfect silence save for the occasional creak of a teetering building bracing against the wind.

“*Where’d you guys go?”* Emmett shouted. No answer but that of his own voice resounding in fading refrains through the canyon. He shouted again. Echoes again. Silence.

Abigail felt something soft and cold on her face.

Snowflakes passed through the beam of Emmett’s headlamp.

“Well,” he said finally, “I’ll walk up the street toward camp. June, you and Abigail head the other way. We have whistles in our emergency kits, so I suppose we should blow on those if we find the others.”

“I think splitting up is a horrible idea,” Abigail said.

“All right, then which way do you—” Emmett stopped mid-sentence. “What the hell?”

He looked past them now, his brow deeply furrowed, his mouth dropped open.

Something staggered toward them down the middle of the street, and it occurred to Abigail that the way it moved through the fog, in slow, exaggerated steps, resembled something from a horror movie—a zombie or some demon that had just crawled out of its own grave. It was close now, within ten feet of them, dragging its right foot and clutching its side.

Their guide collapsed in the hotel doorway, Scott’s yellow fleece slicked with blood, and down blowing out of a gaping tear in his vest.

Abigail felt her stomach lurch, something rising up her throat. Her mouth tasted of salt and metal.

Emmett was already on his knees, cradling Scott’s head.

“What happened?” he asked.

Scott moaned, his face so drained of color that it seemed to glow in the dark, his body quaking with the onset of shock. “I wanna see it,” he gasped. “Lift my jacket.”

Emmett unbuttoned Scott’s down vest and unzipped his fleece jacket, Abigail at his ear, whispering to him that everything would be okay. Emmett peeled away the layer of thermal underwear and they all stared at the black hole in his side, blood sheeting down his pale abdomen into a widening pool on the old boards.

“Fuck!” Scott said. “Fuck, it hurts!”

“What do we do?” Abigail asked. “You’re our guide. You know first aid, right? Tell us how to help you.” Scott’s eyes rolled back in his head. She slapped his face.

He came back, his eyes only slits now. “Run,” Scott hissed. “They’re coming.”

“Who?” Abigail asked.

“We aren’t leaving you,” Emmett said, but Scott’s eyes had already closed. “Scott! Scott! June, keep pressure on the wound.” She pressed her palm into Scott’s side, blood leaking between her fingers.

A scream blasted through the canyon.

Abigail whispered, “Turn off your headlamp, Emmett.”

He did, everything still, and, for the moment, quiet.

A snowflake landed on Abigail’s eyelash. She blinked it away and rose to her feet. “We need to get out of here,” she said.

“There,” June said. Abigail saw it, too. Fifty yards ahead, at the north edge of town, something sprinted toward them, arms pumping.

“It’s Jerrod,” Emmett said.

Abigail had begun to backpedal even before she saw the shadows emerge out of the fog behind Jerrod. The one in front slipped something out of its belt. As it reached him, it placed a hand on the back of Jerrod’s head, jammed something into the base of his skull.

Jerrod dropped without a sound.

June released an involuntary whimper.

Emmett said, “Oh my God.”

Abigail thinking, *This is not happening. This is not happening.* But it was. The shadows had passed Jerrod’s body and were now closing fast on the hotel.

“We need to split up and run,” Abigail said. “Right now.”

16

The ghost town screamed by in a blur of fog. Abigail glanced over her shoulder, saw movement in the mist, though she couldn't tell if they were still chasing her. She had put a hundred yards between herself and the hotel when she veered off the main street and bent over. Having come from sea level in Manhattan, the thin air of Abandon crippled her lungs. She crawled through a hole in the side of a building, tried to turn on her headlamp, then remembered the bulb had burned out.

It took a moment for the faintest suggestion of shapes to appear—a table, dismembered chairs, tall windows, remnants of a stove. Abigail stood in the dance hall.

At the far end, the ceiling had collapsed and crushed a small stage.

Footsteps approached from outside. With quick, careful strides, Abigail traversed the rotten floorboards. Some creaked under her weight and she couldn't help but think of the staircase in the hotel, how suddenly it had given way. She stopped where the floor had fallen through, looked back toward the double doors that opened out onto the street. Abigail couldn't hear the footsteps anymore, only her accelerated breathing. The sound of whispering passed through the broken windows and something ran by on the street.

She dropped down through the hole in the floor, a nail catching on her parka, ripping through the sleeve, her pink fleece jacket, her long johns, all the way to her skin.

With less than three feet of space between the floorboards and the ground, she crawled away from the hole, through puddles of freezing water, until she found a dry spot. Crouched in the darkness, shivering under the floor of the dance hall, she felt a warm trail of blood meandering down her right arm.

Her breathing still sounded deafening, but she couldn't stop herself. The darkness sparked with her own dizziness.

What happened to Lawrence? She wondered what had happened to her father.

The floor creaked above her. Abigail held her breath, her pulse thrumming against the back of her eyes. The floor moved again. She raised

her hand to see how near it dipped to the top of her head. Her fingers passed between the boards, touched the tread of a boot.

She froze. For a full minute, no movement, no sound. Her quads were cramping. *They're listening. Did I make a noise? Can they hear my heartbeat?* The cut on her right arm stung. Sweat ran down into her eyes, and she shut them tightly against the burn.

This made her think of growing up in the suburbs of Baltimore. She'd been a tomboy, and on Friday nights, in the summer of her tenth year, she would meet the neighborhood boys at a city park to play something they'd invented, called the "Dead Game." One kid was named the "killer," and everyone else had one minute to run and hide. The killer would then go hunting, and if he touched you, you were dead and had to lie on the ground until he'd caught everyone. She recalled hiding under a sliding board one night, watching the killer pass by, and the exhilaration, the pretend-fear that had flooded through her.

The boot lifted and she listened to the footsteps trail away.

As she huddled in the darkness, trying to fathom what was happening, she heard June's voice at the other end of Abandon, shouting her husband's name. For a moment, she considered hiding there indefinitely, days if she had to. *But what if they've seen me? What if they know I'm somewhere in town? In daylight, it won't take them more than a few hours to search every structure. Safer to escape now, in the dark.*

Abigail remembered her cell phone, which was sitting in the top compartment of her backpack in the vestibule of her tent. She probably wouldn't get service in this canyon, but earlier today, when they'd crested the pass, she'd gotten a signal, even called her mother.

Abigail crawled back through the puddles and the dirt to the hole in the floor, rising up slowly, until only her eyes peeked out.

The dance hall appeared empty. June's screaming had stopped. Even the wind had died away. Abigail scrambled up onto the floor. She felt safer, less exposed on her stomach, so she crawled along on her belly back to the hole in the wall she'd come through.

She peered through the busted clapboard out into the fog. It would be too dangerous to run back to camp through town. She'd have to follow the side street, climb the slope, and stay above Abandon as she worked her way up-canyon. Then she could go straight down the hill into camp, know before

she arrived if anyone was there. Her battery was charged. If she had a signal, she'd call 911, but assuming she didn't, it might be an hour up to the pass.

Abigail took a moment to calm herself, filling her lungs with oxygen in preparation for the run. She tried to ignore it, but the thought forced itself on her: *They see me, I'm dead.*

Abigail ducked through the hole and stepped outside.

She jogged down the side street. Five more seconds and she'd be out of the ghost town.

Something darted out from behind the dance hall. A hand covered her mouth.

"It's me, Abby." Lawrence's voice. He pulled her down behind the building.

She said, "Jerrod's dead, and Scott's hurt bad."

Wood creaked in a structure across the street.

"Listen," Lawrence said, "there's a house up that slope, with a bay window in front. I want you to go there, hide inside, get out of the open."

"My headlamp's out."

"Take my flashlight."

"What about you?"

"I tweaked my ankle. You'll move faster without me. Here." He handed her his day pack. "There's a gun inside and a box of rounds."

"I can't."

"You can if you want to live. There's a button on the left side of the Ruger. Press it. Cylinder flips open, you put the shells in. It's double-action. No safety. Just squeeze back the hammer and fire. Now listen. When I say 'Run,' you go and you don't stop and you don't look back, no matter what happens. I'll go a different way, try to meet you in the house. We'll figure something out." Footsteps moved toward them up the side street.

"What's happening here, Lawrence? Who are these—"

"I don't know, but you have to get going. Now run."

Abigail scrambled to her feet, shouldered the pack, and took off.

Soon she was passing wiry firs and vacant cabins, dreary and haunted-looking in the freezing fog, fighting with every step the urge to look back. She suddenly emerged onto a long, narrow glissade, lost her footing on the old ice, and slid upside down on her back, racing toward the bottom. The

ice ended, but she still tumbled through the scree, finally crashing into a boulder. Blood streamed down her face from a gash above her left eyebrow. Down in Abandon, someone screamed. She got up, pushed on, nearing the timberline, with the ghost town a hundred feet below, scarcely visible through the fog.

Just ahead was the house with the bay window—two stories, still intact. She glanced back. Too dark and foggy to see a thing. She came up on the house, saw a doorway toward the back of the old structure, slipped inside, scrambling over a pile of boards into a large empty room. She could see the bay window—four glassless rectangles with a view of the ghost town. She dropped the day pack on the floor and glanced through a window frame on the side of the house, spotted movement at the base of the slope she'd just climbed—two black specks slinking through the shrubs. She lost them amid the ruins of a homestead, then picked them up a moment later, larger and close enough that she could see their deformed eyes, protruding long and sharp, like fangs. *Night-vision goggles. They know I'm in here.*

Abigail knelt down in the corner and unzipped the day pack, shone the flashlight inside, saw the dull gleam of the revolver.

She didn't realize how badly her hands were trembling until she tried to grab the gun.

Holding the flashlight between her knees, she tore open the box of .357 Magnum rounds. Hollow-point shells spilled across the floorboards, most of them disappearing into a hole. She felt the button on the left side of the frame, pushed it. The cylinder swung open. With her hands shaking, it took her three tries to get the first round into the chamber.

Footsteps approached. Abigail pushed in three more shells, wondered if she'd even loaded them correctly, having never held a gun until this moment.

With the six chambers loaded, she pushed the cylinder back and stood up. Through the window, she saw it was snowing now, and the two shadows were much closer, less than twenty yards downhill. They moved up a steep section of the slope, climbing on all fours, like spiders, up the mountain. She turned off the flashlight, hunched down in a corner, knees drawn into her chest. Thumbed back the hammer, total dark save for the faint outline of night through the bay windows. Blood running into her eyes. Outside, rocks

shifted. She couldn’t slow her breathing down, her chest heaving, hyperventilating. *You have to be quiet. You* have *to.*

She closed her eyes, stilled her mind. Her heart followed. Then came the awful silence. No more whispering voices or clandestine footsteps or distant screaming.

Ice pellets ticked against the house, pinged on the tin roof.

She waited. A minute passed, and the image took hold again—that shadow thrusting something into the back of Jerrod’s head. It wasn’t just the brutality that horrified her.

Why is this bugging me? *She remembered.* Oh Jesus.

One of the interviews she’d conducted for her article on PTSD vets had been with a colonel in spec ops. They’d stumbled onto the topic of the silent kill, and he’d told her that, contrary to common belief, slitting a throat wasn’t the quietest way to kill a person. He’d explained that when Force Recon or SEALs wanted to kill instantly and with minimal noise, they’d jam a combat knife at a forty-five-degree angle through the base of the skull, where the bone was thin. It scrambled the medulla oblongata. Instantly wiped out all motor control.

That’s what happened to Jerrod. Are these guys spec ops?

In the darkness several feet ahead, someone exhaled.

The floor creaked.

Liquid fear, pulled the trigger, muzzle flash burning her eyes, ears ringing, and in that light splinter, she saw the rotted interior of the ghost house and two men garbed in night camouflage and face masks, suppressor-fitted machine pistols slung over their shoulders.

They stood by the bay window, one of them kneeling, hit.

As she thumbed back the hammer, she heard the hiss of compressed air. Barbed electrodes clung to her parka. Then she lay twitching and screaming on the floor.

1893

17

Molly Madsen sat in her bay window, watching snow pour down onto Main, sipping from a bottle of wine of coca. It had stormed all night. She'd even startled from sleep once, awakened by a slide razing the forest below town.

An untrodden lacquer of powder lay between the buildings, and on the hillside, she could see the cabins—stoves and hearths aglow, smoke trickling out of chimneys. Here came the first passerby of the day, a petite blonde plodding through the snow. *That pretty piano player.* Molly had grown accustomed to staring down into the saloon, watching the young woman play. Sometimes, late at night, with the street gone quiet, she could even hear the music from the hotel suite.

Footsteps approached from behind; strong hands settling on her shoulders. She finished peeling one of the oranges from the basket Ezekiel and Gloria Curtice had left at her door the night before, offered him a wedge, her suite redolent of citrus.

"I was thinking, Jack. Could we take a trip to San Francisco in the spring? I'm so tired of all this dreadful snow."

"That's a lovely idea."

She squeezed his hand. Jack gazed down at her, eyes luminous with adoration, said, "Remember the first time I saw you? I was walking down the street on a San Francisco evening, when I passed this spectacular creature. I doffed my hat, smiled."

"Did she smile back?"

"Oh no. This was a lady, by every account. She simply nodded, and I thought, I have to know who that woman is."

"So what did you do?"

"Followed her to a ball."

"And then?"

"We danced. We danced all night."

"Do you remember what she wore?"

"An evening gown the color of roses. You were the most exquisite thing I'd ever seen. You still are."

“I’m so happy, Jack.” Molly rose from the divan and stepped around to her husband. Even after all this time, he seemed utterly unchanged from the man she’d married in 1883—short blond hair, boxy jaw, ice blue eyes, even that same spruce tailcoat he’d worn the night of their first encounter. “Let me show you what I want for Christmas,” she said, reaching back to untie her filthy corset, letting it fall to her feet. She pulled her chemise over her head, tossed it at the wardrobe, and climbed into bed. “Jaaaaack.” She whispered his name like a prayer, fingers already fast at work in that swampy heat between her thighs.

18

On their way to Packer’s mansion for a Christmas brunch, Ezekiel and Gloria Curtice eyed the steep treeless slopes that swept up on both sides of the trail, listening for the first hint of the breaking snow that would precede a slide. Lying in bed in their fire-warmed cabin, they’d heard them going throughout the night, like the thunder of distant cannons. Stephen Cole sent up a prayer for protection as they moved into the treacherous gap between the mountains, their webs sinking through a foot and a half of powder with every step. When they emerged from the avalanche path, the party stopped to rest near a spring that erupted out of the rock.

Ezekiel and Stephen packed down an area of snow so they could sit without sinking. Then the preacher dipped an Indian earthenware vessel he’d brought into the spring, offered the first sip to Gloria.

“No thank you. I’m afraid it’ll chill me down even more.”

“Zeke?”

“Naw, Preach, you go ahead.”

They sat in the cold and awesome silence. Ezekiel pulled off his fleece-lined gloves, took out a hip-flask tin of Prince Albert tobacco, set to work loading his pipe.

Ahead, the terrain flattened into a high basin, with a lake in the middle that in the summer turned a luminescent green, as though the lakebed were made of solid emerald, with the sun underneath it. Even then, no one could stand the water for more than a minute, leading the residents of Abandon to bestow it with the most extreme temperature designation in their arsenal —“*fucking* cold.”

Gloria tucked in the blond curls that had escaped from her sealskin cap, shivering despite having bundled herself in two petticoats, two pairs of stockings, one of Ezekiel’s heavy woolen jackets, and an enormous pommel slicker.

“Mind if I ask you something, Stephen?”

“Gloria, you can ask me anything anytime.”

Ezekiel blew smoke rings, watched the snowflakes cut them down.

“If I tell you this, can it stay between us? ’Cause nobody else in Abandon knows what I’m about to say.”

“What do you think you’re doin, Glori?” Ezekiel said.

“Trying to ask the preacher something.”

“Don’t go botherin him with—”

“Zeke,” said Stephen, “let her say what’s on her mind. I’m here to help if I can.”

“Glori, wish you’d let it lie,” Ezekiel said, but she ignored him.

“There’s no easy way to say it, Stephen. I used to be a whore.”

“Aw hell,” Ezekiel said.

“And Zeke used to be a outlaw. Killed a few men in his time. We each did enough sinning for ten. We changed. Not perfect by any means, but we’re decent folk now, or try to be at least.”

“I believe that,” Stephen said as he brushed the snow off his visored felt hat.

“Reason I’m telling you this is ’cause I wanna know about God’s punishment.”

“What about it in particular?”

“Something happened a year ago—”

“Ain’t gonna listen to this,” Ezekiel said, and he struggled to his feet and webbed a ways up the trail, where he stood with his back to them, smoking his pipe, watching the basin fill with snow.

“Go on, Gloria,” Stephen said.

“Last January, we were living up in Silver Plume. Had a son, name a Gus. Him and Zeke went out together one morning. They were waiting to cross the street, and somehow, Gus’s little hand slipped out a Zeke’s. Our boy walked in front of a hansom… .” Stephen reached over, touched Gloria’s arm. She wiped her eyes. “The horse stepped on Gus and one a them big wheels … rolled over his neck. Weren’t nobody’s fault. Not the driver’s. Not Zeke’s.”

“Not yours.”

“Gus died right there in the street.”

“I’m so sorry, Gloria.”

“Now I want you to tell me something, Stephen.”

“I’ll certainly try.”

“I just told you how Zeke and I used to be a wicked pair a souls. There’s this little voice been whispering to me ever since he died, saying that God

took Gus from us as punishment for all the bad things we done. That ain't true, is it? He ain't that kind a God?"

The preacher's calm brown eyes seemed to darken. He looked away, and when he spoke again, his voice took on a harder, bitter aspect.

"You're asking me if we worship a vengeful God?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I'm the person to answer that for you."

"Why not?"

"What if I were to say that that voice in your head is right? That it's entirely possible He took your son from you?"

"If that's the truth, I hate myself and Zeke for what we were. And I hate God for what He is."

"Then perhaps we shouldn't continue this conversation, Gloria. I'll not be responsible for turning someone from their faith." Stephen used his walking stick to boost himself onto his feet. "I'm sorry I can't be of more comfort to you."

"But just last week you preached about God's unconditional love."

Stephen reached down, extended a gloved hand to Gloria, helped her stand. "It's what people need to hear. They want a version of God as benevolent father, ready to protect, eager to provide, but to hold no accounting. I don't believe in that God anymore."

"But you did last Sunday, so something changed your mind?"

"Not something, Gloria. God Himself." And there were sparks in the preacher's gentle eyes—deep loss and rage at that loss—as he turned away and trudged up the trail.

19

Emerald Lake lay ten feet under the snow beneath their webs. The storm eased as they hiked across, and through a hole in the clouds, a shaft of sunlight passed, firing into blinding white a piece of the serrated ridge that enclosed the basin.

A mansion materialized in the distance, ensconced on the edge of the lake. “Ever time I see it,” Ezekiel said, “I can’t get past what a load a burro’s milk that thing is.”

“It does look misplaced in these environs,” Stephen said.

Packer had named his estate Emerald House—four symmetrical wings of opulence that met in a central block, crowned by a cupola. The top floors had been cedar-shingled, the ground level constructed of stone. Numerous brick chimneys soared from the gabled roof.

“Well, that’s strange,” Ezekiel said. “Ya’ll see even a whisper a smoke rising from a one a them chimneys? Why you reckon he’d let his fires go out in a storm?”

There were drifts to the second-floor windows, and a snow tunnel with fifteen-foot walls had been shoveled to the portico of unbarked Douglas fir trunks.

They arrived at a pair of oak doors and Stephen rapped the knocker three times. They untied their webs, waited. Stephen banged the knocker again.

Gloria glanced up at the long overhanging eaves, said, “You don’t think he forgot?”

The preacher speculated. “Perhaps he stayed in town last night, not wanting to chance getting trapped in a slide on the way home.”

“Well, we just hoofed it through a blizzard, and I’m gonna by God walk in there, find out if we’re gettin breakfast for our trouble.”

Ezekiel grabbed one of the large iron handles, tried the door.

It opened.

“Think we should walk in unannounced, Zeke?” Gloria said.

“Yeah, I do.” He stepped through.

Gloria sighed, followed him in with Stephen, and closed the door.

Every kerosene lamp had burned down save for one at the far end of the first floor, in the kitchen—just a wink of fire from where they stood. Soft

gray light slanted through the tall windows that framed the foyer.

“Hello?” Ezekiel shouted. “Anybody on the premises?”

His voice resounded through Emerald House.

They made their way through the foyer and up a cascading stairway, beneath rafters of fir timbers. At the confluence of the four wings, a staircase switchbacked up the heart of the mansion. Between the stairs, a rectangle of weak light fell upon the marble floor, having passed through a skylight fifty feet above.

“Cold in here,” Stephen said. “Hasn’t been a fire in awhile. And shouldn’t there be some servants? If I’m not mistaken, Bart keeps a staff of four or five ladies through the winter.”

He walked to the north wing, peered through French doors into a great room furnished with a chaise longue, sofas, parlor chairs.

The opposite wing encompassed a dining room on a par with a feudal banqueting hall. Ezekiel looked in but glimpsed only the chairs and the long, broad table, naked of tablecloth, silverware, china.

“Our breakfasting prospects ain’t appearing promising. Let’s check Bart’s room. You remember where it is, Preach?”

“I believe it’s in the east wing of the next floor. Overlooks the tarn.”

“What do you bet he bent a elbow in the saloon all night, came home roostered?” Ezekiel said. “Hell, might have to wake him.”

They took the steps up to the second floor, calling out hellos as they started toward Bart’s wing, not a single lamp in operation to illuminate Packer’s extravagance.

Ezekiel suddenly stopped. “Might want to step back there, Glori.”

She looked down at the hardwood floor, saw that her arctics stood in a gooey puddle of blood. She leaped back toward her husband, brought her hand to her mouth to stifle the scream.

“Well, that’s an empty saddle,” he said. “Look. More.” Faint tracks of blood led back to the staircase, up the next flight.

“Bring your revolver?” Stephen asked.

“ ‘Fraid not. Didn’t think I’d be needin it of a Christmas morn. Tell you what. I’m gonna go see what in hell’s goin on here.”

“Zeke, no—”

“Glori.” By the way he said her name, with a gravity she’d not heard in years, Gloria knew better than to push the issue. “Ya’ll don’t move from

this spot. Savvy?”

As Ezekiel ascended toward the servants’ quarters, he filled with an exhilaration he’d not experienced in some time. It wasn’t fear—he couldn’t recall ever having been plagued by that emotion, even as a younker in Virginia—but an airiness in his stomach, birthed by the anticipation of something he’d always had a taste for, and still did. It reminded him of the rough old days, helling around with the boys. In all honesty, he had to own up to missing aspects of his former self. Much as he loved Gloria and his life with her, he couldn’t recall the last time he’d felt this alive.

Ezekiel reached the penultimate floor, but the blood continued up, sticky little pools of it on the steps and banister. He climbed on, following the drops and spatters to a small cupola that Bart had transformed into a library, the first seven feet of each wall lined with books, the last five sloping up to a hipped roof.

It made no sense. Blood on the floor, on the spines of books, entrails draped across the back of a leather chair, but the library was empty, its two hearths fireless and this top floor cold enough to cloud his breath.

Then he noticed the ladder tucked under a long bookshelf, glanced up, saw a trapdoor beside the skylight in the ceiling, almost smiled at the needles in his stomach. Using a shiny eight-foot brass pole with a hooked end, he reached up and unlatched the lock and pushed open the hatch. Then he stood the ladder up, bracing it against the opening, snow already falling into the library.

He climbed fifteen steps before emerging onto a small open veranda, the highest point of Emerald House. The panoramic eyeful of the four wings and chimneys and the surrounding basin distracted Ezekiel for a split second before he saw them—five figures near the wrought-iron railing on the east side of the platform.

Bart Packer and his servants.

Three had slumped over, face-first and half-buried in the newly fallen snow. Two still sat upright, Bart one of them, his face black, purple, and distended beyond recognition from what looked to have been a merciless beating. Their throats had been opened, the snow in the vicinity stained with great quantities of blood. “Son of a bitch,” he whispered. “Son of a bitch.” It snowed again, but the wind whipping across the roof kept the platform mostly bare. He heard approaching footfalls, spun around.

Stephen climbed through the trapdoor onto the roof.

“Goddamn, son,” Ezekiel said, shouting to be heard over the wind. “Lucky I didn’t have my gun. You’d a been belly-up, coming up on me like that. What’d you leave my wife—” He saw Gloria coming up the steps behind the preacher. Ezekiel rushed past Stephen, stood blocking her view of Bart and the servants.

“You seen it?” he asked her.

“Seen what?”

“Oh sweet Jesus,” Stephen said.

“Glori. Glori, look at me. My eyes. They’re up here.”

“Dead?”

“Had their lamps blown out, I’m afraid, and trust me, ’less you alkalied to it, sight like this, you’ll spend the rest a your life tryin to forget.”

“But you seen it.”

“Awful to say, but I seen worse.” *I done worse.* “Now I’m madder’n hell you came up here when I said stay put, but I can probably let that slide if you listen to me.” He held her face in his hands. “Look here, Glori. Go on back down now. Go on.”

He watched her descend back through the trapdoor, then walked up to Stephen, said, “Man, where the fuck is your head? My wife almost saw this. Got half a mind to throw your ass off this roof.”

But the preacher stood stone-faced and glaze-eyed, staring at the stiffs and all of that red snow surrounding them. “Who do you reckon would do a thing like this?”

“Bad men,” Ezekiel said. “Looks to have been done with a couple a Arkansas toothpicks. Nasty work. They were probably worried about gunshots settin off a slide, blockin their way out a the basin.”

Stephen started toward the dead. Ezekiel grabbed him by the shoulders, drew him back. “Best to let ’em lie for now, Preach. What can you do?”

Stephen nodded. His hands shook. He tried to steady them.

“Is it any wonder, Zeke, that He hates us?”

“Who?”

“God.”

“Wait. You sayin God hates His own creations?”

The preacher gestured at the carnage. “Wouldn’t you?”

20

When she opened her only Christmas present of 1893, Harriet McCabe ran shrieking in circles around the ten-by-ten cabin where she lived with her parents. It was by leaps and bounds the most extravagant gift she'd ever received, her mother having skimped on their family's last three food orders so she could purchase the doll from the general store's window. Samantha was sixteen inches tall, came with two dresses and a little comb to brush her luxurious red hair.

"Now I understand why we been eatin pooch and splatter dabs for supper, 'stead a meat," Billy grumbled, still stretched out and hungover on the lumpy straw-filled mattress.

Bessie said, "I's fine to make the sacrifice. Look at your daughter, Billy. You ever seen her so happy? Don't it warm your heart even a little?"

Harriet sat on the dirt floor by the sink—just a washbasin on an upended packing crate—whispering secrets to Samantha.

"Fire's gettin low," Billy said. "Go on, bring in some wood from the porch. This shithole's drafty as hell."

"Billy! That mouth! It's Christmas mornin, and your daughter—"

"Get goin, I said!" So Bessie wrapped every available blanket around her underpinnings and stepped into Billy's arctics. When she'd gone outside, Billy sat up in bed and raised his arms over his head. At twenty years, he was small and looked young for his age, with jittery eyes that caused most men to treat him like a boy. He was handsome until he opened his mouth. His front teeth had resembled jagged canines ever since his father had broken them when Billy was nine. He got up, the dirt floor freezing, his head pounding. He could feel the morning cold slipping through his stained and threadbare long drawers.

He staggered to the table, covered in oilcloth and a few airtights of rarities they'd saved for Christmas. Billy pried open a tin of mustard sardines, crammed a handful into his mouth. He went over to the cabin's only window and swept back the curtains Bessie had sewn out of an old lace-edged petticoat—nothing to see of the outside world, condensation having frosted the inside of the glass.

A whiskey bottle filled with tiny seashells sat in the windowsill. He ran a finger across the glass and thought of his big brother, Arnold, missed him so much in that moment, he felt his throat close up, went short of breath, like someone had punched him in the gut.

Billy turned around, looked at his daughter.

“Merry Christmas, girl,” he said.

The six-year-old glanced up at her father, and he saw the wariness in her eyes, and it shot him full of sadness and vexation.

“Got a present for your mama,” he said, and he reached under the bed and lifted something the size of a small loaf of bread, packaged in newspaper. He walked over to the spruce sapling they’d uprooted from the hillside above their cabin. Bessie had potted it in a lard bucket, kept it watered, but the needles had begun to brown at the tips. Billy placed the package on the flour sack wrapped around the base of the Christmas tree.

“Y-y-y-you like that doll?” Billy asked, blushing as he always did when he stuttered, no matter that he was conversing with his six-year-old. He’d never had a speech problem before coming to Abandon.

“Yessir.”

“That’s good. It cost a damn sight more than we can afford.”

He lifted the lid and peered into the graniteware pot on top of the stove. The snow had finally melted, tiny bubbles rushing up from the bottom. He took his tin cup down from one of the newspaper-lined shelves above the washbasin and poured the hot water over the old Arbuckle’s grounds. “Christmas mornin, ain’t even got a decent cup a coffee to sip. This is belly wash.” The front door swung open and Bessie stumbled in with two armloads of firewood and a draft of bitter cold. She dropped them on the floor, opened the iron stove, shoved in three logs. “Guess it’s still snowin,” Billy said, noticing the streaks of white in Bessie’s yellow hair.

“Comin down like it got no mind to stop. Dust me off, will ye?”

Billy walked over, brushed the snow off her blankets.

“W-w-w-well, looky what’s under the tree,” he said.

Bessie saw the small package on the flour sack and smiled. “I didn’t think you’d got me nothin.” Bessie draped the blankets over the rocking chair beside the stove and approached the dying spruce.

She lifted the present. “Heavy.”

“C-c-c-c-come over to the bed.” Bessie sat down on the mattress. Harriet crawled over, crouched at her parents’ feet.

Bessie ripped off the old newspaper.

“Holy God, Billy.” What lay in Bessie’s lap amid the torn newspaper was inconceivable, a dream.

“I weighed it,” Billy said. “Twenty-two pounds.”

“Mama, let me see.”

Bessie hoisted the bar of solid gold, the metal freezing cold to the touch, marred with scrapes and tiny chinks, a dully gleaming bronze.

“How much?” she asked.

“Gold’s at twenty dollars and sixty-seven cents a ounce, so you’re holdin more’n seven thousand dollars right there.”

It was more money than Bessie had ever heard of. She began to cry. Billy put his arm around her.

“Where’d you get this?” Bessie asked.

Billy sipped his coffee. The grounds had been used and reused so many times, they barely even colored the water.

“Look at this place.” He waved a hand at their shanty. “We live in squalor,” he said. “Ain’t ye tired of it yet? This floor turnin to mud ever time it rains? Chinks fallin out. They’s goddamn drifts in the kitchen from snow blowin through the walls.”

“Where’d you get it?” Bessie asked again.

“I-I-I-I don’t think ye need to know. We’re rich, Bessie. Concern yourself with that. Oh, and this ain’t the only one.”

“What do you mean?”

He grinned. “That bar’s got a whole mess a brothers and sisters.”

Bessie dropped the bar on the bed and stood up. With her hands, she framed Billy’s acne-speckled face. He’d been trying for a mustache the last six months, but it looked patchy and ridiculous.

“I need to know right now what you done,” she said.

He swatted her hands away.

“What you mean, what I done? I’m providin for my fuckin family.”

“Billy, when you brought the high-grade home from the mine, I didn’t like it, but I let it go. Next thing I know, we got a half ton a ore in the root cellar. I said nothin. But that.” She pointed at the bar of gold. “You take it from the Godsend?”

“What if I told you I found it and—”

“I’d call you a black liar.” He jumped to his feet and grabbed Bessie’s arms and shoved her toward the kitchen.

She crashed into the washbasin and the shelves. A can of condensed milk fell on her head, jars of sugar, long sweetening, flour, and salt shattering on the dirt floor. When Bessie looked up, Billy stood over her, eyes twitching, face bloodred.

Harriet had disappeared under the table, but her crying filled the cabin.

Billy ripped the oilcloth off the table, glared at his daughter. “Now you shut that fuckin yap, Harriet! I’m speakin to your mother, and I don’t wanna hear peep one out a you!”

The little girl buried her face in her dress to muffle her sobs.

“Your daughter, Billy!” Bessie screamed. “That’s your—”

Billy grabbed his wife by the ankles and dragged her toward the bed. He picked her up and slammed her onto the mattress, climbed on top of her, pinning her underneath his weight.

“L-l-l-l-iisten, you ungrateful cunt,” he whispered, straining to hold her down. “By God, I’ll make you be still.” He slapped her twice. Bessie quit struggling. They lay pressed together, panting, Bessie trying not to gag at the fishy reek of Billy’s breath.

“It’s Oatha, ain’t it?” Bessie said. “He got you into somethin. You changed since you taken up his company.” Billy pressed his forearm into his wife’s neck and leaned into her windpipe.

“M-m-m-m-make no mistake,” he whispered. “One word, I’ll fuckin kill ye. Simple as that.”

“And your daughter, Billy?” she wheezed. “Gonna kill Harriet, too?” Bessie saw it happen. The madness spilled over in Billy’s eyes and she knew he would suffocate her. “All right, baby. All right.” She’d been digging her fingernails into his biceps, but now she let go and ran her fingers through his greasy sandy-blond hair. “Billy.” She couldn’t produce anything louder than a whisper. “Billy, I can’t breathe.”

It passed. He let up on his wife’s neck, but he still lay sprawled on top of her as she coughed and gasped for air.

“You gonna make me kill you one a these days,” Billy said.

All Bessie could do was stare into his twitching eyes. It wasn’t anger she felt toward him. Not anymore. Only fear and profound sadness, because so

little about him resembled the person she'd married in West Tennessee at fourteen. That sweet and tender boy felt as distant as her father, long dead from stone on the chest.

Her eyes caught on the bottle of seashells in the window. She thought of that happy summer in '89 when they'd taken a steamboat down the Mississippi to visit Billy's brother on the Gulf Coast. It was the first and last time she'd seen the ocean, but she'd never lost the smell of it or forgotten the cool shock of salt water running under her feet that morning she and Billy had walked the beach together collecting those shells.

Billy rolled off of her and sat up.

Bessie touched the swelling knot on top of her head.

"You never beat me in Tennessee."

"When'd you give me cause? Now … this gold. We got a problem?"

"No, Billy."

"W-w-w-w-well, all right, then."

He sighed and got up from the bed, walked back over to the table, knelt down. Harriet still had her head buried in her gingham dress, so all he could see of her was a battery of black curls.

"Come on out a there now, girl. Me and your mama is all right. Sometimes adults have to talk things out, find a remedy for a situation." The little girl lifted her head, eyes still brimming with tears. "Come on now, honey. Your doll's over there on the floor all alone. She's upset, too. What's her name?"

"Samantha."

"You just gonna leave Samantha over there to cry by herself? Ain't you her mama now?" As Harriet crawled out from underneath the table, Billy said, "Well, how's about we crack open a can a oysters. It's Christmas after all, ain't it?" And Billy flashed Bessie his broken-tooth smile, Bessie thinking, *I don't know if it's this town or Oatha that done it, but you ain't the same. This thin air's poisoned you. Ain't my Billy no more. I've lost you.*

21

Christmas morning, Oatha Wallace slung his oilskin slicker over the coatrack and breathed in the smell of Joss Maddox's cigarette.

"Comin down, huh?" she called out from behind the bar.

Oatha removed his slouch hat, beat the felt brim against his leg to dislodge the snow, and replaced it on the tangle of wavy black hair that fell to his shoulders. He strode to the pine bar, where Joss had already poured two tumblers of whiskey and uncapped a bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

"So," she said. "How merry of a Christmas is it?"

He opened his coat, reached into the inner pocket.

"We got there with both feet."

When Joss saw the bar of gold, she went moist between her legs, reached out and touched Oatha's hand. He drank both tumblers and took a long pull of beer. "Tell me, Jossy—"

"Joss."

"Damn, you're snorty. Who's the woman across the street, sittin up in that bay window? She watches me ever time I pass by."

"Molly Madsen, and you ain't special. She watches everyone."

"What is she, a lunger, up here for the rarified air?"

"No, ten years ago, her husband sent her out here to set up a home. He knew Bart somehow, was gonna assay for the mine. Well, he never came. Never wrote. Just up and quit her." Oatha smiled.

"Bart felt awful about it, put Molly up in the hotel when she finally ran out a money. Been supportin her ever since. What I've heard, Molly went crazy as a sheepherder over it. Hasn't left that room in five years. Still thinks her husband's comin for her."

"Had a feeling she was sent for supplies." He pointed at the tumblers. She filled them. He drank again, then stepped quietly over to the potbellied stove, so as not to rouse Al, the deputy, who'd once again drunk himself into an unconscious stupor. Oatha warmed his hands, which were heavily calloused and perennially black with mine dust and grime. He wore thirty-year-old garments from his stint fighting for the Confederacy—gray trousers and a matching double-breasted frock coat with pewter buttons. There was a single row of braids on the left sleeve, denoting his rank as

junior officer in the infantry. He'd long since ripped off all other insignia. Old wax drippings marred the shoulders of his frock coat, a telltale sign of his employment with the mine.

Lana sat at the piano, having come to the saloon at first light.

Oatha walked over, stood watching her play.

When she'd finished the song, he clapped, put his hands on her shoulders, said, "Merry Christmas, Miss Hartman. You sure do a beautiful job fillin out that corset and camisole, if you don't mind me sayin. I was wonderin if you'd take a walk across the street to the hotel. Thought you and me could exchange presents. I'd sure fancy a trim—"

"Oath." Joss said his name softly, but her voice cracked with rage, her black eyes smoldering. "Come here. Quit pirootin—"

"I'm talkin with Miss Hartman at the moment. I'd extend you the same opportunity, but seein as how you're presently chained—"

"Son of a bitch. Put this plain. I'll cut off your grapefruits."

Lana fixed her gaze on the yellowed ivory keys, paling, trembling.

Oatha sidled back up to the bar.

"Why you so knotted up? You her fuckin madam?"

Joss smiled and made a move so deft and graceful, the next thing Oatha knew, the right side of his face had slammed against the bar, Joss cradling his head, a cold knife point digging into his left ear.

"Swear to God," Joss whispered, wisps of her black hair tickling his mustache, "I'll jam it straight through whatever brains you got left in there. Go on playin now, Lana. It's all right. You won't be bothered no more." Oatha chuckled, though he didn't dare move. From his tilted vantage point, he could see Al, a half grin on the lawman's face as he shaded in oblivious repose beside the stove.

"Joss, would you accuse me of exaggeration if I said that is the most useless cocksucker I ever laid eyes on?"

"Al?"

"Yeah."

"No, I wouldn't contradict that statement. Now I'm gonna let you up, and you and me is gonna come off the rimrock. Behave yourself."

Joss released him, shoved the bowie back into its leather sheath under the bar. She set up two tumblers while Oatha retrieved his hat. They raised their glasses.

“To your impending release,” Oatha whispered.

They clinked and drank. Joss glanced at the sleeping deputy, then whispered, “How’d it go last night with ol’ Bartholomew?”

“It went.”

“Smoothly? Without incident?”

“Well, by the end of the proceedings, Bart sure as shootin wished he’d never yapped to you about them bars.”

“What I mean is, you did it quick, right? There weren’t no need to drag it out, make things any harder on the man than necessary.”

“Billy fucked it up.”

“How?”

“Particulars ain’t important. It got done what needed to get done.”

“You sayin the boy was rough on him?”

“Well, Billy hadn’t never done nothin like it before. He got carried away, but—”

“That little shit.” Oatha withdrew a scrap of paper from his flap pocket, slid it across the bar. Joss unfolded it, saw where Oatha had scribbled something on a torn-out Montgomery Ward page advertising hobnailed miners’ boots. “Fuck is this?”

“Wrote it last night. Notes for what you need to do tomorrow when I come back for you.”

She lifted her suspenders and slipped the paper into the patch pocket of her plaid dress shirt. “What of the boy? You trust him?”

“Shit no, but what other choice I got? Can’t play a lone hand, haul it all up there myself, can I?”

“Oath—”

“It’ll get taken care of. You just worry about them notes I made for you. We do this right, everthing’ll work out. Now this child’s gotta haul out. This ain’t gonna be easy in a blizzard.”

“Know this. When the time comes, I’ll be the one to take care a that hobble-tongue chore boy.”

“Joss—”

“Ain’t arguin with you about it. He gave Bart a rough shake, boy gonna by God learn somethin about pain on his way to hell.”

Oatha headed for the coatrack. He’d just done the last button on his slicker and reached for the door when Joss called his name. He turned back.

She held up the piece of paper he'd given her.

"Before I say this," she said, "let me warn you. If I see a grin, a smirk, a eye roll, one fuckin hint a condescension—"

"Jesus Christ, chew it finer. I gotta go get Billy."

She shook the paper. "Can't use this."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I can't *use* it, Oatha."

"Oh." He started back toward the bar.

"I said, not a fuckin word."

"I just said 'Oh.' It ain't a judgment. Why didn't you tell me this when I give it to you in the first place? Think I give two shits whether you can read or not?"

2009

22

Abigail returned to consciousness, aware of only two things—the staggering pain in her head and the echo of voices, one of them her father's.

"Don't say that to me again, Lawrence. You know exactly why we're here. And now that your partner's out of commission—"

"I swear to you, I—"

"Ain't believing this. Motherfucker *wants* me to take him apart."

"Put away the knife, Isaiah. He's gonna talk. I can feel it."

"That true, Larry? My man Stu know some shit I don't?"

"This is just a huge—"

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yeah, a huge—"

"Oh no, no, no. All right, Lar. After I slice off your thumbs, we'll continue this—"

"Okay, I'll—"

"No, I think I better go ahead—"

"We have to go to Emerald House."

"Big mansion up the trail?"

"Yeah."

Abigail opened her right eye. It took five seconds for the darkness to sharpen into focus. She sat with Lawrence, Emmett, and June inside one of the ghost town's structures, her hands bound behind her back. It all looked familiar—the archways, the collapsed staircase, the climbing rope still dangling from the second floor. Three men—she assumed they were men—dressed in night camouflage and face masks busied themselves packing an assortment of equipment into black backpacks.

Under the archway leading into the lounge, Scott lay holding his abdomen, moaning softly. She wondered if Jerrod's body had just been left in the street.

Didn't I shoot someone in that old house?

She leaned into Lawrence, whispered, "What's happening?" As he turned, she saw that his right eye had been closed from a vicious blow.

"I don't know yet, but …" One of the men finished zipping his backpack and walked over, crouched down in front of Abigail.

“Dirty Harriet,” he said, grinning a big mouthful of straight white teeth through a slit in the face mask. She recognized his voice. It belonged to the man who’d threatened Lawrence. Isaiah. “Bad with that little Ruger, ain’t you? You’d have killed my man, Stu, if he hadn’t been sportin Kevlar. Nasty cut over your eye. Needs stitches.” He pulled a roll of medical tape from his pocket, tore off a strip. “But this’ll have to do.” She groaned when he pinched the gash above her left eyebrow closed and slapped on the tape. Then Isaiah and his partners donned black parkas and trousers over their coveralls, each man also wearing black neoprene gloves and Gore-Tex-lined leather combat boots. One of them pulled a fifth of Ketel One out of his pack, unscrewed the cap, took a long drink.

“Stu, what the fuck?”

“You want my hands to shake? Besides, my ribs are killing me. Might be cracked.”

“So take a fuckin aspirin.”

Isaiah came and squatted down, facing June, Emmett, Abigail, and Lawrence.

He looked them over, said, “In a minute, we’re gonna cut your nylon restraints. You’ll be free to move, but I would advise you to follow my orders. To. The. *Let.* Ter.” He held up a machine pistol. “Let me tell you about this work of art. Custom Glock Eighteen. Automatic. Supressor. Aimpoint. Thirty-three cart mag. We each have one, and we won’t hesitate to aerate your ass if you deviate one millimeter from our directives. Ain’t gonna be no love tap from a Taser, you fuck up again. You feel me?” Nods. “Can I get a ‘yessir’?”

He pointed the machine pistol at June.

“Yessir.”

Then he aimed it at Emmett.

“Yessir.”

“What about Scott?” Abigail said, nodding toward the archway.

“Motherfucker look like he can walk to you? He had a seizure before you woke up.” Isaiah leaned in toward Abigail, their faces barely an inch apart. His breath smelled of cinnamon chewing gum.

Two years ago, while waiting to catch a cab after a Christmas party in the East Village, she’d felt something push into her back, followed by low, menacing words in her ear: “Wanna die tonight, bitch?” She’d never seen

his face, just listened to his footsteps running up the sidewalk thirty seconds later. He'd taken her purse, earrings, necklace, and left her with something that ruled her even to this moment—the ever-present knowledge of how fast a normal day, a normal evening, could turn into her being raped and bleeding out on the sidewalk. No such thing as safety or control. The worst moments of your life you never see coming, although she had to admit something had seemed wrong about this trip since the previous morning at the trailhead, when she'd caught that look between Scott and Lawrence. Had they known this was coming?

The man called Isaiah still spoke to her.

"That your boyfriend? Y'all fucking? What?" She shook her head. "I poked him in the gut. Be dead in an hour. Maybe less. Painful way to go. But if you'd rather stay with him"—he slid a Fairbairn-Sykes from an ankle sheath and pressed the knife point under her right eye—"I'll be happy to leave you here, because the truth, bitch, is that I don't need you."

Abigail stared into his large white eyes through the holes in the mask. They reminded her of eggs. She felt his sweet breath on her mouth, the cold of the blade against her cheek. She shook her head again.

"That's what the fuck I thought. Now, I didn't get my 'yessir' from you."

23

The orders were brutally simple. Walk. Keep quiet. Step out of line, you get shot. Lights on at all times. They'd even given Abigail fresh batteries for her headlamp.

Isaiah led the way, the four captives following single file, his partners bringing up the rear. Abigail walked between Lawrence and June, snow already accumulating in the grass and on Abandon's splintered remnants. With her hands free, she'd managed to scrape the dried blood out of her left eye. She could see now, but her head still throbbed like hell and her bones felt weak and jittery, her nervous system torqued from the Taser.

They passed their campsite on the outskirts, the llamas huddled between the tents. Abigail lusted after the cell phone in her pack.

Soon they'd left Abandon, gotten a half mile up-canyon, the ruts of the old wagon trail filling with snow and nothing to see but the flakes passing horizontally through the headlamps' beams, tiny planets of light in that galaxy of darkness and wind. Abigail heard June struggling to stifle sobs. She reached back, felt June squeeze her hand, tears gliding down Abigail's face now as she tried to comprehend the murder of Jerrod, Scott tied up alone as he bled to death in that degenerated hotel, and how in God's name she was walking at gunpoint through a snowstorm in this secluded canyon, too horrified even to contemplate what their captors intended to do with them.

Isaiah veered off the main trail.

They climbed narrow switchbacks up the hillside.

Soon the procession was four hundred feet above the canyon floor, scrambling over scree. Through the gap between the mountains, Abigail walked so close to her father that the steel toes of her Asolo boots occasionally banged into his heels. She thought she heard the trickle of running water—a stream, a spring perhaps.

Another half mile and they'd come to the edge of a lake. It stood mostly unfrozen, the wind pushing ripples that lapped at the fragile ice extending out a foot from the bank. Isaiah had started in the direction that would take them around the north side when Lawrence said, "That's not the best route." Isaiah stopped, looked back. "There's a rock glacier on that end, a quarter

mile ahead. Drops right into the lake. It's steep. Very dangerous. Our party had a near miss yesterday with this type of situation."

"You know I trust you, Larry, but do you know why?"

"No. No, sir."

"Because I know that you know I will fuck your ass up if you give me bad information."

They followed the south shore around Emerald Lake. Deep in the basin, the wind had died. Snow fell vertically again, and aside from the whisper of its collection, there was no sound save for the labored breathing of the party and the squeak of boots in the inch of new snow. Across the lake lay the rock glacier—boulders shifting, smashing into one another. From several hundred yards away, their collisions sounded like small-caliber gunshots.

Stu yelled suddenly from behind, "Hey, what's … what was that? You see that?"

Everyone stopped.

"What you got?" Isaiah said, reaching for his machine pistol.

"I saw a light."

"Where? I don't see anything."

"Straight ahead." As Abigail stared into the distance, she didn't see a light either, only the hulking shadow of Emerald House. "I'm telling you, Isaiah, it didn't last long, but this light or candle, whatever it was, just winked on and off."

"What floor was it on?"

"I don't know. It happened so fast."

"Anyone else see this light?" No one answered. "Larry? You the expert."

"No one's lived there in a hundred and sixteen years."

"I'm just telling you what I saw," Stu said. "Maybe I'm a little—"

"Fucked-up is what. You got every other day of your life to be a drunk motherfucker. I need you to hold your shit together tonight. You do that for me?"

"Yeah, Isaiah. Sorry."

Abigail filled with apprehension as she walked the last hundred yards to Emerald House. She'd never seen anything like it—this rambling edifice enveloped in darkness and silence and ruin, the corpse of what it had once been.

Wet snow clung to the facade. Windows busted out. Shingles peeled off. Four-story chimneys toppled into piles of rock. The north wing was a shambles but intact, its southern counterpart long since collapsed on itself, the winter snows crushing it through the years, until all that remained was the foundation and a small mountain of demolished framework.

Isaiah followed the stone pathway up to the portico, passing between the massive rotting Douglas fir trunks. Yellow notices had been stapled to the oak doors—Forest Service warnings regarding the instability of Emerald House, threatening all trespassers with aggressive prosecution. A feeble attempt had been made to chain the iron handles together.

Isaiah called out, “Bolt cutter,” and Stu came forward with his pack, unzipped it, and produced the requested tool. One easy snip and the chain fell onto the sandstone. Isaiah grabbed the door handles, hesitated. “Larry,” he called out. “It would be awfully tragic if some heavy shit was to fall on my head. Why don’t you come do the honors?”

Abigail watched her father walk under the portico.

“Your show now,” Isaiah said as Lawrence pushed open the doors and led the way inside.

24

Jesus, this place is huge.” Isaiah let the beam of his headlamp pass through the foyer. “My light doesn’t even reach the far end. We safe in here, Lar?”

“No, but this is the most stable part of Packer’s mansion.”

The foyer smelled dank, redolent of mildew and wet wood. From her spot in line, Abigail shone her light on the cracked marble floor, saw piles of scat, puddles of ice. Through a hole in the roof, snowflakes drifted down. She removed one of her mittens, let her fingertips graze the stone wall—cold and soft and wet, carpeted in dead lichen.

“There’s a journal in my pack,” Lawrence said. “I need to see it.”

Isaiah unzipped it, pulled out a black spiral-bound notebook. As Lawrence took it and sat down on the cascading staircase, Abigail couldn’t stop herself. “What’s going on here, Lawrence?”

Isaiah grinned. “You don’t know?” He laughed, his southern-tinged voice reverberating through the foyer. “Nice, Larry. Very nice. More I get to know you, more I like you.”

When Abigail aimed her light in her father’s face, she recognized the guilt and the circuit closed, connecting on some primordial level to that girl who still inhabited her, and a subconscious memory, twenty-six years old, of that exact look of shame when her daddy had slipped into her bedroom one night to say that he had to go away.

“What have you done?”

“I’m sorry, Abby. I’m so sorry.”

“For what? Tell me.” Isaiah’s hand passed through the beam of light. She fell. The darkness tingled. Emmett started forward, but his nose ran into the barrel of Stu’s machine pistol. He held up his hands, retreated.

Isaiah knelt down, grabbed Abigail’s ponytail, lifting her head so their eyes met. “My man’s got some serious shit to attend to. Next time, the fist will be closed. You’ll lose teeth. Now get the fuck up.” He jerked her by her hair, pulling her to her feet. “And shut the fuck up.”

“That isn’t necessary,” Lawrence said, his voice trembling.

“Tend to your notebook,” Stu warned.

Abigail touched her cheek. The bruise burned.

“All right, Lar. Where we going?”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure, since I haven’t actually seen it. This is all theoretical, based on my research. I was gonna try to find it on this expedition.”

“You bullshitin me, Larry? Don’t make me—”

“Will you give me two damn minutes here? I’m not saying I can’t take you to it. I just need more time.” Lawrence studied his notebook, flipping through several pages.

Somewhere nearby, water dripped, followed by a faint and distant scratching. From high above, came the chirp of a pika. Lawrence finally closed his notebook, stood up. “Bart’s wing.”

“Lead the way.”

Lawrence guided them out of the foyer, toward the staircase that rose up the center of Emerald House. “Last one of these we went up collapsed,” he said to Isaiah.

“You haven’t been up here?”

“Not since last summer. I’m sure it’s weakened.”

“Then you best tread lightly. I’ll be behind you.”

Abigail was third in line, and to her relief, this staircase felt much sturdier than that flimsy death trap in the hotel. Part of the banister was missing, but none of the steps creaked.

As they reached the next floor, Stu whispered, “Isaiah, hold up. I hear something.”

Their beams of light swept through what remained of the second level—tall door frames and window frames, three wings still intact, the south reduced to a hole so gaping, you could drive a bus through it, snow blowing sideways into the mansion and slowly rotting everything it touched. Another winter or two, the water damage would reach the stairwell.

“Stu, I don’t know what I’m gonna do if this is another false—”

Isaiah suddenly lifted his machine pistol, motioned for his partners to do the same. Abigail heard it, too—the rapid patter of footsteps. Isaiah and Stu moved soundlessly, side by side, away from the stairs, toward the west wing.

Twenty feet in, Isaiah stopped and held up his hand, pointing at a closed door a little ways into the passage. Isaiah looked at Stu, counting down

from three with the fingers of his right hand. He kicked the door, which exploded back off its rusted hinges.

The mansion filled with earsplitting shrieks, like those of women being murdered. A host of shadows flew out of the room, toward the stairs. June screamed, and amid blinding muzzle flames, Abigail heard panting and the muffled clatter of machine pistols.

A half dozen coyotes blitzed past Abigail, heading down the stairs and into the foyer, their yaps at once jovial and demonic as they escaped through the oak doors into the night.

25

Lawrence led them to the east wing of the second floor. Abigail's head was killing her, and the left side of her face was hot, swollen. Her headlamp revealed a place of absolute decay, the wood-paneled walls warped and blackened with mold. They passed through a small sitting area and arrived at a pair of French doors. Lawrence pushed them open, the hinges grinding rust into rust.

As they entered a short hallway, Lawrence pointed out the first door on the right. "That was Bart's office," he said. "Door on the left opens into the guest room."

Abigail shone her light inside—sparsely furnished, with two single beds, their posts and headboards smashed, mattresses disintegrated into mounds of rotted down, a capsized chest of drawers, fireplace, wardrobe.

They went on, passing large picture frames that had fallen from the walls and lay in pieces on the floor.

"So what you got in that notebook that brought you to this wing?" Isaiah asked.

"In 1889, Packer hired an architect named Bruce Price to design this mansion. I had a breakthrough last winter at the New York Public Library, when I found Price's notes on the final floor plan. The original blueprints don't show this wing's true layout."

Lawrence opened the door at the end of the hall and entered, followed by Isaiah and the rest of the party.

Packer's bedroom formed the eastern extremity of Emerald House—twelve-foot ceilings and large windows still holding glass that in decent weather would've offered a jaw-dropping view of the basin and lake. The walls tapered to a fireplace at the narrow end of the room, spacious enough to roast six-foot logs.

Isaiah motioned to Abigail and the Tozers. "Ya'll sit by the bed and stay quiet." As Abigail sat down beside June, her headlamp brightened the headboard of Packer's bed. She noticed that a word had been carved into the wood, probably by some asshole with no respect for the past, just hoping to memorialize his girlfriend's name: LANA.

It felt good to get off her feet, but her thermal underwear had soaked through with freezing sweat. She unzipped her purple Moonstone parka and her pink fleece jacket.

“I have water in my pack,” she said. “May I take it out?”

“Stu, ya’ll searched their packs back in Abandon?”

Stu and the other masked man had sat down near the hearth, their machine pistols trained on the captives.

“Yeah. Their packs are fine.”

Lawrence stepped through an open doorway beside the entrance to Packer’s room.

“What’s in there?” Isaiah asked.

“This was Bart’s closet.”

“Motherfucker was livin the good life.” They disappeared into the walk-in closet. Abigail couldn’t see her father, but she could hear him knocking on the walls.

Lawrence spoke: “If we were to break through this one, we’d be in Bart’s office.”

“Well, hell, let’s be sure.”

“I’ve measured. There’s nothing strange about the rooms on this side of the hallway. They match up perfectly with the original architectural plans. Now follow me.” Lawrence and Isaiah emerged from the closet and walked back into the hallway. After a moment, Abigail heard Lawrence’s voice again, indistinct and followed by more wall knocking.

She worked her arms out of the day pack’s straps, reached in, and pulled out a Nalgene bottle, the water pumped and purified from the safe part of the stream that Scott had fly-fished the previous evening. The image of him dying in that hotel lobby felt like a stray ember behind her eyes.

The water tasted cold and faintly sweet, so unlike the lead-tainted piss that ran out of her tap in New York. As she drank, she tried to ignore the red dots that traipsed across her chest.

Lawrence and Isaiah returned to Packer’s bedroom.

“This past summer, I made a thorough search of that guest room and found nothing,” Lawrence said. “But I knew there was space between that room and Packer’s room that was unaccounted for. I was getting ready to investigate Packer’s room, when the Forest Service showed up. I didn’t have a permit to be here, and the fine would’ve been huge. I had to sneak

out of the lodge.” He approached the enormous wardrobe to the right of the doorway, grabbed the side of it, tried to slide it out from the wall. “It’s bolted down or something.”

“We’ve got grenades.”

“Wanna bring the whole wing down?”

He pulled open the doors, climbed inside, Abigail listening as he banged around. After a moment, she heard “Aha.”

Isaiah smiled. “What I like to hear. What you got, baby?”

Lawrence’s voice came back muffled. “Entire back panel”—he struggled with something—”slides out.” A panel of wood flew out of the wardrobe and crashed onto the floor.

Isaiah was peering in now. “Would you look at that,” he said. “You’re a genius, Larry.” Isaiah pointed at Abigail. “Come here. We may need you. It’s a tight fit.”

Abigail got up, crossed the floor. She stood beside Isaiah and looked into the wardrobe. With the panel removed, a black steel-hinged door was visible, three feet by two feet.

“Looks like some serious shit,” Isaiah said. “Hope for your sake you can open it.”

“Well, the bad news is this locking mechanism. Dates back to the 1860s. There are four locks, requiring three different keys.” He touched the various keyholes. “Here’s the pin tumbler lock. Here’s the barrel lock. These two are bit styles.”

“Ah fuck. We are gonna have to toss a couple grenades in here.”

“Won’t do anything. If this is the kind of door I suspect it is”—he rapped his knuckles on it—”it’s made of ten layered one-eighth-inch steel sheets. But there’s some good news, too.”

“Pins and needles, Lar.”

“See here? Three of the locks are already open. Only thing standing in our way is this bit lock, which has a turned bolt sealing the door.”

“So what do we do?”

Lawrence faced Isaiah. “I’ll be needing a guarantee.”

“A guarantee.”

“I spent the last ten years trying to find what’s in here. Now, I’m willing to let it go—”

“That’s a relief.”

“—if I have your assurance none of us will be harmed. Give me that, I’ll get you inside.”

“That’ll put your little heart at ease?”

“It will.”

“Yeah, all right, Larry. You get me in there, you’ll all walk out of these mountains.”

“That’s the truth?”

“You questioning the word of a marine?”

Lawrence let his pack drop to the floor. He unzipped the outer pocket, scrounged inside. After a moment, he withdrew something, held it up in the light of his headlamp.

Isaiah grinned through his mask at the long, toothed key. “Where’d you get that?”

“Found it in a safe in Bart’s office last summer. I don’t know for certain that this will open that bit lock, but it is the right type of key for it.”

“And what do we think is in there?” Abigail asked.

“Summer of 1871, Bart Packer was broke and prospecting alone in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. One afternoon, he got stuck above timberline in a thunderstorm. Found an overhang high on the mountain, took shelter there. He was waiting for the storm to pass when he felt an icy draft coming from behind. He turned around, noticed an opening in the rock, and crawled through it. When he got his candle lit, he found himself in a large chamber, and not ten feet away sat a headless skeleton clad in Spanish armor. Bart correctly deduced that he was looking at a conquistador, who’d most likely been in that cave since the 1500s. What lay beside the bones of this ancient conqueror was a pyramid of gold bars, ninety-one in all, twenty-two pounds apiece. That’s about a ton of pure gold.

“When Abandon was in its heyday, it would’ve been worth six-hundred and sixty thousand dollars. Today, with gold trading at eight hundred and two dollars an ounce, Bart’s ninety-one bars are worth over twenty-five million. Now, there may not be ninety-one bars in here. But even if he spent half of that, twelve and a half mil’s a good payday.”

“And you were just using this expedition as an excuse to find this gold?” Abigail said. “What were you planning to do? Sneak off with it without telling anyone?”

“No, of course not. Scott and I—”

“Scott knew?” Suddenly, that look between Scott and her father at the trailhead made perfect sense.

“—couldn’t haul it all out ourselves. That’s seventeen miles, and even if everyone carried as much weight as they possibly could, it’d take at least two or three trips. Besides, it’s not just about the dollar value. Abigail, this was going to be a huge historical—”

“You son of a bitch. You selfish son—”

“Time to open that motherfucker, Lar.”

Lawrence sighed, turned away from his daughter.

He took his time, delicately working the key into the lock.

The key turned and the mechanism clicked.

“It worked,” Lawrence whispered. He grabbed the handle, and when he’d heaved open the steel door, Isaiah shoved him aside and climbed into the wardrobe, his headlamp shining into a secret room the size of Packer’s walk-in closet—walls, floor, and ceiling made of stone.

“You’re fuckin kidding me.”

26

Larry, where are my gold bars?”

“I don’t understand. They should be in there.”

Isaiah shoved Lawrence out of the wardrobe. “Sit down!” he yelled at Abigail. “Not you, Larry.” Isaiah backed Lawrence up against one of the giant windows.

“I’m telling you. They should be there. Maybe someone else—”

“You holding out on me?” Isaiah unsnapped the ankle sheath under his trousers.

“I swear,” Lawrence said. “They should’ve been in there. I don’t know —”

“Maybe that’s the case,” Isaiah said, then suddenly pressed the sharp, thin bone of his forearm into Lawrence’s neck. “But how do I know? *Really. Know.* You aren’t lying?”

“I swear to you I’m not. Please—”

“Words don’t convince me, Larry, but you know what does? Pain. For instance.” Isaiah gently removed Lawrence’s glasses, dropped them on the floor, crushed them under his boot heel. “I’m gonna cut out your right eye —”

Abigail’s stomach turned. *Not happening.*

“No, please—”

Isaiah leaned harder into Lawrence’s windpipe, briefly cutting off his air supply.

“—and give you thirty seconds to rethink your answer. If you’re still maintaining you don’t know where they are, I may be more inclined to believe you. Know why?” Lawrence shook his head, eyes bulging. “Because right now you don’t understand what real pain is. You think you do. You don’t. But when I’m holding your warm eyeball in the palm of my hand, you’re gonna have a much better idea. You’ll know that I’m willing and fully capable of taking you apart piece by piece. This is not about torture. It’s about me knowing in my heart that you’re telling the truth.”

“Isaiah, just listen. I need a minute to—”

“Sorry, Larry. This is the only way.”

“Stop it, please,” Abigail begged. “He’s my father. He doesn’t know.”

“Yeah, well, we’re about to find that out for certain.”

Isaiah set the point of the dagger under the lower lid of Lawrence’s right eye.

Lawrence struggled to cover his face.

“Hold still, goddamn it! Want me to accidentally push this into your brain?”

Abigail jumped up and lunged for Isaiah, but someone tackled her from behind.

She tried to fight him off, but he had her by the wrists in no time, his weight pinning her to the floor.

She stared up into that masked face, inches from her own, didn’t smell vodka, reasoned it couldn’t be Stu. What she could see of his eyes seemed strangely comforting, something familiar about them, so deep, burdened. *Because you recognize them.*

Abigail whispered, “You weren’t killed. That was an act, for our benefit.”

She jerked a wrist free and ripped off the man’s mask, saw the scarred, bearded face of their guide, Jerrod Spicer.

“The fuck, Jerrod?” Isaiah said.

“*You’re with them?*” Lawrence said, incredulous.

“She recognized my eyes.” Jerrod got up, screamed, “Fuck! *How do we walk away now?*”

“You knew it might come to this,” Isaiah said. “That was always a poss —”

“It’s already come to a whole helluva lot more than you said it would. Why don’t you take off your—”

Isaiah stepped back from Lawrence, ripped off his mask. “Happy?” Abigail’s headlamp illuminated the face of a thirty-something black man she would’ve thought exceptionally handsome under different circumstances, his smooth-shaven features in perfect proportion—pronounced cheekbones, intense mud-colored eyes, dimples that caved when he let loose his broad and malignant smile.

Jerrod lifted off Stu’s face mask, and the first thing Abigail noticed were the ringlets of Stu’s curly black hair, then the week’s worth of stubble, thin lips, sunken, red-rimmed eyes, saddest she’d ever seen. He’d been handsome once, but whatever monster was eating him inside had also sucked the life from his face, drawing it into an ax-thin blade of emaciation.

Jerrod took Isaiah over to the window. Stu got up and joined them. They whispered. Abigail looked at her father. He still stood against the window, knees shaking, crying, the floor wet under his hiking boots and a dark stream sliding down his cheek and into his beard, as if he wept blood. It took him a moment to muster his voice.

“There’s one more place to look,” Lawrence finally said.

They stopped talking. Isaiah walked over, crowded him up against the glass again.

“Larry, I sincerely pray for your sake you aren’t fucking with me.”

27

They made their way back to the stairwell.

“What’s up here?” Isaiah asked as they ascended the second flight of steps.

“Servants’ quarters.” They reached the third floor, this level more devastated by the elements than the first or second. Up ahead, in the west wing, the gabled roof had caved, their headlamps showing snow falling through the ceiling. “We need to go up one more,” Lawrence said.

They climbed, wood creaking, bowing where they stepped.

Abigail was the third to emerge into the cupola. She shone her light on walls lined with empty shelves, the books having long since disappeared, taken by vandals or reduced by time and moisture to wads of leather, paper, glue. Two chairs and a sofa had disintegrated on the floor. Half the stones had fallen out of the two hearths. Abigail edged toward an opening in the middle of the floor, peered down, her light beam shining to the ground level.

“All right, Lar. Where is it?”

Lawrence carefully moved over to one of the bookshelves and knelt down, the floor cracking. When he stood again, he held an eight-foot brass pole, severely tarnished, with a hooked end. He looked up. They all looked up, lights converging on a square door in the ceiling. Lawrence reached up, unlatched the rusted lock, pushed open the hatch. Snow fell through the hole into the library.

“You been up there before, Lar?”

“No. I always thought it was too dangerous. If the floor were to give way, it’s a fifty-foot fall. But all things considered, I think it’s worth the risk.”

“How the hell we gonna climb up through that hatch?”

Lawrence pointed back to the bookshelf. “With that ladder.”

Jerrod and Stu pulled the ladder out from under the long bookshelf, hoisted it up, and braced it against the opening.

“Doesn’t exactly look like a Craftsman product,” Isaiah said, grazing his gloved hand across a cracked wooden rung.

“I’ll go up first. Test it.”

“No, she will.” He waved Abigail over. “What’s up there, Lar?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing.”

“That wouldn’t bode well for you, for any of you.” He looked at Abigail. “Up you go.”

She grasped the sides of the old ladder and began to climb, carefully easing her weight onto each rung. The fourth one snapped, but she caught herself. The tenth rung was missing. As she neared the top, snow collected in her hair. Then she scrambled out of the hatch, stepping onto the roof of Emerald House.

“Stay in one spot!” Lawrence shouted up at her. “I have no idea how stable it is up there!” She backed away from the opening, leaned against the wrought-iron railing that surrounded this small open veranda, snow blowing so hard into her face that she choked on it, had to cover her mouth with her hands.

Lawrence came up, then Isaiah, Emmett, June, and finally Stu and Jerrod.

Abigail rubbed her arms, and as she stood watching her father, it hit her: There was nothing on this veranda but an inch and a half of snow, and he looked nervous in the beam of her headlamp, like he was trying to pass off Monopoly money for true currency.

“Well,” Lawrence said, kneeling down, inspecting a corner of the veranda, brushing the snow off the stone. “I’m just at a total loss, Isaiah.”

Abigail gripped the iron railing. June and Emmett stood beside her, Isaiah with his back to her, near a skylight that had long since been liberated of its glass.

“*You’re* at a loss,” Isaiah said. The hood of his parka had fallen back, snow collecting in his black hair. “What exactly does *that* mean, Larry?”

“It means … it means I don’t know where the gold is. I thought I did, but I don’t. I’m horribly disappointed, believe me.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“But it just isn’t here. I don’t know where else to look, and that’s the truth. So here’s what I’m thinking. We don’t know a thing about you, so what if you three just leave us here, disappear into the night. We never see you again. You never see us. And we never say a word. Not even about Scott. We’ll pretend this never happened.”

“He’s right,” June said, staving off tears. “Emmett and I would just be so grateful to be home again. To put all this behind us. I’m sorry you didn’t find the gold you were looking for, but can’t this be over now? You men

came wearing masks, which tells me that you didn't come into these mountains intending violence."

"We could just leave, Isaiah," Jerrod said. "Scott and Lawrence know more about me than any of us, but I'd be willing to walk."

Lawrence said, "Look, we could spend tonight in Packer's mansion, give you guys a chance to head out. I'm telling you, it'd be like this never happened."

Isaiah stared at the snow-dusted stone beneath his feet. "Stu," he said, "you got an opinion about this you'd care to toss into the hat?"

"I'm with you, man. Whatever you wanna do, I'm with you."

Isaiah nodded. He turned around, looked at Abigail and the Tozers, who were standing together on the east side of the veranda. He approached them, faced Emmett.

"I don't think I caught your name."

"Emmett Tozer."

"Cool if I call you Em?"

"Sure. June calls me that all the time."

"Well, Em." He pointed at Lawrence. "For this, you can thank that motherfucker."

He raised the machine pistol to Emmett's forehead, a red bead drawn between the man's widening eyes.

June screamed, "No, it's not his fault!"

The Glock coughed a burst of fire, and the back of Emmett's head blew out. He dropped to his knees, fell over sideways. In the low light, the blood looked like steaming oil as it blackened and spread through the snow.

June threw herself over her husband's body, shrieking his name.

Abigail tasted that salt and metal in the back of her throat again. *The worst moments of your life you never see coming.* She turned and spewed over the railing, knew as the bile burned her throat that she'd spend the rest of whatever life she had left trying to sever herself from this moment.

"You happy, Lar, you greedy motherfucker?" Isaiah said, his voice rising.

Abigail sank down into the snow. She could barely hear Isaiah speaking over the wind and June wailing, "Em, come back! Don't you do this!"

"Know what's gonna happen next?" Isaiah was in Lawrence's face now, Lawrence backed up into a corner of the veranda behind the hatch. "I'm

gonna make that bitch get down on her knees, and you are gonna watch me put a bullet through her head. Then I'm gonna get—"

Lawrence cried, "No, don't. I'll—"

Isaiah grabbed his throat. "Don't ever fucking interrupt me! Then I'm gonna get this bitch"—he pointed at Abigail—"but I'm not shooting this one. I'm gonna take this knife and slowly cut her throat, let you watch her drain."

Abigail looked at Jerrod, noticed his legs quaking. Stu had pulled the bottle of vodka out of his backpack and begun to work off the cap.

"And then, if you're still maintaining you don't know shit …" Abigail made herself stand. She wiped her mouth. "… I'm gonna go to work on—"

"Isaiah!" Jerrod yelled.

"What?"

Jerrod started toward him. They met at the skylight, both men covered in snow.

"*What the fuck?*" He pointed at Emmett's body. "I did not sign up for this shit."

"What are you saying? You want out? That it?"

"I don't—"

"You know, you never had the stones to finish the hard shit, did you?"

"I don't want out. I just … You didn't say it'd be like this."

"Well, it is, so stop your fuckin crybabyin."

Isaiah lifted his machine pistol, started toward June, who still lay sobbing on top of her husband. "You watching, Larry?"

"I'll tell you whatever—"

"You can tell me after. Just wanna be sure you know I am not fucking around with you."

He stopped and put the gun to the back of June's head.

Lawrence pushed off the railing, lunged toward Isaiah, screaming, Jerrod and Stu running toward him, Isaiah swinging his machine pistol toward Lawrence, Abigail thinking, *I'm about to watch my father die.*

Lawrence's fourth step brought him past the skylight, and all seven of them suddenly occupied the same twenty-five square feet of floor space.

There was a deep crack, like a rafter fracturing, and the veranda of Emerald House caved in.

1893

28

The preacher and the Curtices reached Abandon at noon, having descended from the massacre at Emerald House in half the time it had taken them to hike up into the basin. Ezekiel hurried them down the desolate middle of Main and up a side street toward their cabin, his jaw set, eyes more intense than Gloria had seen them in a long while, enveloped in a slow burn.

The preacher said, “Zeke, I think we should alert the town to—”

“Ain’t arguin with you about it anymore, Stephen.”

“We’ve got vicious murderers roaming—”

Ezekiel spun around. “Do I come into God’s house of a Sunday morning, tell you how to preach a sermon?” Stephen shook his head. “Don’t counsel me how to proceed in matters a law.”

“Zeke.” Gloria grabbed his arm. “Look.” The hillside above town was dotted with smoking cabins, half-buried in snow and tucked into groves of tree-line spruce, web-trodden paths branching from each one to the side street. Bessie McCabe staggered toward them along the path from her cabin, Harriet in her arms, neither dressed for the weather, wrapped only in quilts, Bessie’s flour-sack underpinnings showing through, and no hat to be seen on mother or child as the snow gathered in their hair. Gloria could see that Bessie’s face was flush with cold, the bruises on her left cheek turning purple and yellow around the edges.

“Everthing all right?” Ezekiel asked.

“Seen you comin up the street,” she whispered, trembling.

“You’re poorly,” Gloria said.

Bessie looked downslope toward town, her eyes stormy with the weight of some damning choice. “I believe he’s cut his wolf loose.”

“Who?” the preacher asked.

Tears were running over her lips now. “My Billy.” And Bessie’s bare hand emerged from the blankets, grasping the bar of gold, snow falling on it, melting, making the yellow metal glisten. “He give me this this mornin, all wrapped up, like some Christmas present. Wouldn’t tell me nothin of how he come to have it.”

“Where’s your husband right now?” Ezekiel asked.

“He left a few hours ago with Mr. Wallace.”

“Know where they went?”

“Rode off toward the mine.”

“You better come on with us.”

“Why?”

Ezekiel leaned in, whispered in her ear for the sake of the child. “Packer and his ladies been murdered up at Emerald House.”

The bar of gold dropped from her hand and sank into the snow.

“What you sayin, Mr. Curtice?”

“In a town of a hunerd twenty-three souls, they ain’t much breathin space for coincidence.”

“They killed ’em? Billy and Oatha—”

“Nobody knows exactly who done what yet. Now, was it just Billy and Mr. Wallace, or was there more men?”

“I think it’s just the two a them. You gonna hurt him?”

“I’m gonna bring him in. Whether or not he gets hurt or kilt, that’s his choice. He do that to you?”

Bessie brought her hand to the bruises, as if to hide them, eyes alight with shame.

“Daddy done it,” Harriet said.

Ezekiel brushed his gloved hand across the little girl’s cheek.

“I’m real sorry about that, sweetie. He ought not’ve.”

Ezekiel squatted down, lifted the gold bar out of the snow, stood mesmerized by it, trying to disavow the shot of adrenaline it pushed through his veins, thinking if there was anything left in him of that man he used to be, he’d ride up to the mine with an entirely different purpose, caught himself half-wishing he’d stumbled onto an opportunity like this back in the old days.

He handed the bar to the preacher. “You better keep this. Well, come on, ladies. No point in y’all standin out here, freezin in them rags.”

They walked up the street, then veered onto the path to the Curtices’ little steeple-notched cabin, a barrel for a chimney pot, a root cellar on the south wall, and a sod roof that in the summertime sprouted sunflowers. At the front door, Ezekiel stopped, said, “Gloria, bring my rifle and the revolver for Stephen. We’ll be needin a box a cartridges for each.”

As the women went inside, Stephen said, “I’ll not carry a gun, Zeke.”

“You kiddin me?”

The preacher shook his head. “But I will ride up with you.”

“The hell you gonna do if they start shootin?”

“I’m praying it won’t come to that.”

“You see the same thing I saw up on the roof a Emerald House? That look like the handiwork a men who talk things out? Hell, we’ll have to get Doc now.”

Gloria returned with the old Schofield in one hand, Ezekiel’s sawed-off Winchester in the other. Bessie was bawling inside, Harriet whispering, “It’s all right, Mama. It’s all right. Don’t cry.”

Ezekiel took the box of cartridges, his carbine by the barrel, said, “Man a God don’t want the revolver, but you hang on to it. Better pull in the latch-string and fort up. Don’t go out. Don’t open it for nobody. Billy or Oatha or some rough-lookin feller come by, you know what to do.” She nodded. “Better go on, load up that Schofield now. Remember how I showed you?”

Gloria threw her arms around his neck, felt the sandpaper of his face against hers, caught that smell of his that still melted her knees. “You come back to me,” she whispered.

He lifted his hat and pulled off Gloria’s sealskin cap so he could kiss her forehead and tug at those blond curls.

“Always have, Glori. Always will.”

29

The cabin of Russell and Emma Ilg stood a hundred yards north of the Curtice homestead and was unprotected by trees, so the snow had drifted to the roof on the windward side. Ezekiel followed the snow tunnel up to the front porch and pounded on the door.

When it opened, a man with disheveled sandy-blond hair and thick spectacles grinned at them. He wore a brown sack coat and matching trousers, and his enormous mustache was freshly combed and waxed. The scent of soap emanated from him, the sour spice of whiskey on his breath.

Over Russell's shoulder, Ezekiel saw Mrs. Ilg carrying a pot from her cookstove to a candlelit dinner table already sagging under its load of steaming graniteware.

A fire blazed in the hearth and balled-up pages of newspaper lay around the base of the spruce tree; their gifts—mostly homemade crafts—were lined up on the makeshift log mantel.

"Merry Christmas, Zeke. Stephen."

"Tell me you ain't fixin to eat, Doc."

"Yeah, in about five minutes. Something wrong?"

"I really hate to do this to you—"

"What?"

"You ain't roostered, are you?"

"Had a nip of whiskey in my coffee a bit ago."

"A nip."

"I ain't drunk, Zeke. What's the problem?"

Mrs. Ilg walked over, her silvering hair pinned up, purple evening gown flowing across the dirt floor in her wake.

"I'd rather say in private."

"Merry Christmas, gentlemen," Mrs. Ilg said.

Ezekiel and Stephen tipped their hats.

"Ma'am."

"Ma'am."

"Well, do we have time to eat first?" Russell asked.

" 'Fraid not."

"What's going on here, Zeke?"

“We’re having to borrow your husband. I apologize for the poor timing. It can’t be—”

“I’ve been cooking all morning. Can’t it wait just an—”

“Honey, if they need me now, they need me now.”

“Doc, we’ll be waitin for you at the stables. Best bring your possibles and your rifle. Don’t dawdle. We gotta light a shuck on this.”

• • •

The livery had been erected a quarter mile north of town to save the residents from the persistent stench, but the wind, when it blew, tended to sweep in from the north, so it carried the odor of shit and trail-worn animals right up Main. In the boom years, the stink was eye-watering, even on the south end of town. But on Christmas Day in 1893, you couldn’t smell the stables until you saw them.

Ezekiel struck out with the preacher and the doctor, the sheriff astride a moon-eyed bay gelding he’d purchased in Silverton that fall. They rode through Abandon and up-canyon toward the Godsend, the horses sinking to their knees, the riders’ heads bowed, hat brims shielding them from the heavy slanting snow.

At the turnoff to Emerald Lake, they picked up the only tracks they’d seen—a ten-burro head-and-tail string led by two horses.

“Can you think of a reason somebody’d be quick-freightin up to the Godsend on Christmas when the mine’s shut down?” Russell asked.

“Sure can’t. And from the look of it, these poor animals are carryin some load. Probably sinkin past their stomachs.”

They rode on, the sides of the canyon closing in, the blizzard diminishing their world until they could see only the tracks they followed. Another mile through deepening powder and Packer’s twenty-stamp operation appeared in the distance, a multilevel mill built into the back of the canyon, flanked by the mine office, lower boardinghouse, and a blacksmith shop.

“Strange not to hear those stamps,” Stephen said.

They stopped twenty yards from the mill, Ezekiel, already cold, beginning to shiver. “That’s a concern,” he said, pointing to where the tracks continued on, not toward the mine, as he’d anticipated, but up the south slope of the canyon.

“You don’t reckon Oatha and Billy were foolish enough to drive that pack train up to the Sawblade?” Russell said.

“Well, unfortunately it looks that way, don’t it?”

“That’s desperate behavior. I don’t like taking the dugway to the Sawblade in July, when the snow’s gone.”

“The hell they got to lose? They murdered five people last night.”

“I’m fair tired of this snow, and I don’t relish the chore it’ll be getting our horses up there.”

“Well, Doc, I don’t, either. I’d rather be back with Glori at the cabin, sittin by the fire, sippin whiskey, but that don’t appear to be in my immediate future.” A great wedge of snow slid off the mill’s sloped roof. The horses startled.

The preacher said, “Y’all think that slope could slide on us?”

“Yeah,” Russell said. “I think it’s entirely possible.”

The three riders followed the tracks away from the mill. At the canyon’s end, they paused, gazed up the smooth white slope, Ezekiel counting five switchbacks before the burro trail vanished into the roiling snow-swollen clouds.

“Two thousand feet up. Madness, Zeke. Pure madness.”

“I know it, Doc, and you’re slick-heeled. Hope that cremello a yours is clear-footed.”

“Don’t worry. She may be light in the timber, but she’s lady-broke and she’s got bottom.”

Ezekiel spurred his horse on and the riders began to climb.

30

They followed the burro trail up the slope, snow clinging to their slickers and greatcoats and hats and the horses and rigs and rifle butt plates and every other conceivable surface, until they resembled a trio of ghosts conjured up out of the snow.

Ezekiel rode point, holding his saddle horn, head lowered to the storm. The other men didn't see it, but he smiled, even more immersed in the moment than when he'd emerged onto the roof of Emerald House several hours prior and witnessed the slaughter that had occurred there.

This last year, he'd existed in a state of numbness so complete, it felt like living death. In bed with Gloria, it would often be well past midnight, occasionally dawn, before he drifted into sleep, so intense were the memories of those exuberant, passionate, bloody Leadville years, his mind blazing back at full bore, trying to unblur the faces, invoke the familiar voices, and tears coming when he did, because they brought with them the fleeting sensation of freedom and his old swagger and the limitless potential every morning had once afforded him. He'd never lain in bed in Leadville, obsessing on the past. It had all been vivid rushing present. Fuck even the future.

One night, he'd recall a week spent specking with the boys near Crested Butte. Another, the rowdy drunken revelry of a Fourth of July celebration. Then he'd imagine himself sitting at a corner table in some bucket of blood, three in the morning, brimming with whiskey as the calico queens hung on his shoulders, watching the paling demeanors of his opponents on the final hand, when he pushed forward his pair of nickel-plated Smith & Wesson revolvers with their mother-of-pearl grips, upping the pot for the flush he held.

Sometimes, he'd just lie there retrieving faces—whores he'd felt tender toward, men he'd fought, men he'd loved, killed, buried—savoring them all, every face, repressed scent, lost sound, with a sweet and piercing nostalgia.

Gus, especially Gus, kept him up nights, Ezekiel's lips moving in the dark as he spoke for them both—father-son conversations of God and love, guns and horses. Once Gloria had woken, asked, "Who you talking to,

baby?” And he’d lied, told her he must’ve been whispering in his sleep. He loved his wife beyond words, but Gus, only Gus, had filled that vacancy, destroyed the angry, restless boredom left in the wake of his outlaw days.

But this Christmas, with his head bowed as the sky hemorrhaged snow, his mind blissfully attended to the present, to keeping his horse on the mountain, to listening for slides over the sounds of wind and snow pelting the leather of his hat, and how his feet had grown cold in the calfskin-lined cowhide boots, and what it would feel like to draw a bead on Oatha and Billy, see what they’d stolen from Bart.

Ezekiel was as happy as he’d been in years.

He felt like the true translation of himself again.

• • •

An hour into the climb, they stopped to let the horses blow.

“How close you reckon we are?” Russell asked.

Ezekiel shook his head. He had no way of knowing for certain, since after thirty yards in either direction, the trail disappeared into mist. They pushed on again, the horses panting and snorting, pausing every few steps.

Then the slope began to level out. Ezekiel found that he didn’t have to lean forward as much and the horses quickened their gait.

He finally halted his gelding, and the others came up beside him on his left, the Doc and the preacher still engrossed in the discussion they’d been having for the last four hundred vertical feet.

“I’m not saying you sull around, but you do strike me as a melancholic these days,” Russell said. “Are you daunsy?”

“I’d not deny it.”

“You sleeping peacefully?”

“Not often. My mind tends to race in the silence and I don’t know how to shut it off. I have these terrible headaches.”

Ezekiel studied the distance. His back ached. The burro tracks continued on as far as he could see, which wasn’t far in the blizzard. He suspected the pass lay just ahead.

“Do you ever experience desperate thoughts?” the doctor asked.

“Desperate? You mean like ending myself prematurely?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“It’s a grave sin, Russ.”

“I’m aware. Don’t mean it ain’t afflicting you.”

“I have, on occasion, considered it.”

“Recently?”

“Last night.”

At this elevation, no trees could thrive, but glancing up ahead, Ezekiel discerned a badlands—vague profiles of rock formations and a small boulder field, drenched in snow and looming like a herd of Gothic monoliths. He turned to his compatriots. Their conversation embarrassed him, a subject he felt uncomfortable being made privy to, though that wasn’t his reason for interrupting. It was merely to advise the Doc to slide his Big Fifty out of the rifle scabbard and keep on the eye in case they were dry-gulched.

Russell said, “You should come by my office, Stephen, let me examine you. Your gums have a blue tinge. Absent a full evaluation, I can’t say for sure, but it could be lead—”

“Doc, I’m sorry to break up your conversation, but—”

The ball made a loud crunch as it entered Russell Ilg’s head through his left eye, taking a large shard of his skull with it on the way out. Then came the thunderous boom that Ezekiel recognized as a big-bore six-gun. The lead ball had knocked Russell from the horse, but his stovepipe boots had caught up in the stirrups, so that he hung upside down, the contents of his skull dropping into the snow as his horse dragged him back down the slope.

Ezekiel dismounted. The snow rose to his waist. He grabbed the Winchester, yelled at Stephen as another report spooked the horses.

“Get off a there, man! *You* wanna *get kilt?”*

But the preacher sat stone-faced and frozen in the saddle, staring through falling snow at the two figures darting through the boulder field.

Ezekiel pulled Stephen’s boots out of the stirrups and knocked him off his mount into the snow. “Get back down the slope and stay hid. Take Doc’s rifle if you want and keep your head down.”

A shotgun blasted, and Ezekiel’s horse boiled over, neighing and rearing up on its hindquarters before collapsing.

He crouched in the snow, eyes peeking over the surface as the preacher crawled away, weeping.

Ezekiel scrambled from his dying horse.

After thirty feet, he stopped, gulped down several lungfuls of thin air. He cocked the lever of the carbine, sat up, sighted a rock outcropping forty yards upslope that he suddenly realized was the pass, torn white ribbons of cloud streaming over it, driving the snow sideways, making it impossible to see anything distinctly.

A lead ball zinged past his right ear.

He swung his rifle around, sighted the left edge of a small boulder fifty yards away, and pulled the trigger on a vaquero hat that had peered around the corner.

It disappeared and he cocked the carbine again and clambered to his feet, now fighting toward the boulder field through chest-high drifts, smiling and swelling with all the murderous joy of a boy playing war.

31

Ezekiel walked into the boulder field and hunkered down at the base of a broken pitch of rock. He reached into his slicker and pulled the box of .44-40's from an inner pocket of his sack coat, tore it open, and slid five cartridges into the loading gate.

With the wind subsided and his horse no longer braying, what struck him now was the silence, his senses heightened, everything distilled. The smell of wet rock and gunpowder. The sound of snow falling on his hat. His heart thumping like it meant to bust out of his chest. Burning cold spreading through the left side of his face.

He heard distant whispering, got to his feet, stepped out from behind the rock formation. What lay before him on the gentle downslope reminded Ezekiel of a snowy labyrinth—countless boulders of varying size, some no bigger than a barrel, others rivaling wagons and cabins, bunched together in spots, spaced out in others, and a million places to hide. For a fact, Oatha and Billy had deadwood.

Twenty feet ahead, he spotted what he'd been looking for—tracks in the otherwise smooth, unbroken snow. He waded through the powder, lightheaded.

After three strides, he froze. From behind a table-topped boulder came an exhalation. He brought the carbine's butt plate flush against his shoulder as something edged out from the rock.

He nearly shot a rawboned burro with missing ear tips, buried to its neck and laden with an empty cantia. It stood watching him through large dull eyes.

He moved on through the boulder field.

It had stopped snowing, and that seemed to magnify the silence.

He came to the tracks. Two sets. The snow so deep he had to squat down to find which direction the boot prints pointed, now pushing forward again with what he knew was deluded confidence.

Behind any one of the hundreds of rocks, they were laying for him, and this would all be decided by dumb luck: who saw who first.

The sound of a block of snow calving off a boulder drew his attention, and when he turned back to the tracks, a slouch hat poked out of the snow

thirty feet ahead.

The carbine bucked against his shoulder and he lunged behind the nearest rock as a shotgun exploded the silence.

The shooter had disappeared when he peeked around the corner, Ezekiel figuring he'd ducked back under the snow to reload.

He sighted the spot where he'd seen the hat. Had there been only one, he'd have felt at ease staying indefinitely, pinning the man down, waiting for him to lift his head again. But the prospect of a standoff made him nervous with two men in play.

As he debated what to do, he heard the unmistakable snick.

Perhaps five yards behind and a little to the left.

Thought he was dead.

No sound like the hammer of a six-gun going back.

"Y-y-y-y-you go on and, and, and, and, and throw that rifle away."

Ezekiel remained crouched in the snow, leaning against the rock.

"Swear to God. I-I-I got a bead drawed on the back a your head."

"All right." But Ezekiel didn't throw his carbine aside. He kept a firm grip on the forend stock, a finger in the trigger guard, and turned slowly until he faced the boy standing waist-deep in snow.

Ezekiel had hoped to see the revolver trembling in Billy's hand, but the enormous Walker Colt was steady and leveled on his chest like a small cannon. "That was some shootin back there," Ezekiel said. "Head shot from what? Fifty, sixty yards?"

"Told you, throw that artillery down."

Billy's face twitched as if someone had placed hooks in the left corner of his mouth and was yanking them with a string. Ezekiel found the boy's eyes, didn't like the jitteriness he saw, would have preferred two rounds of ice. At least you saw it coming that way.

"We're neighbors, Billy. Our wives are friends." As he spoke, Ezekiel let the carbine's barrel ease down. Another few inches, he'd take the boy's head off. "You got a nice family in Bessie and Harriet, and I believe that shot that kilt the Doc was a accident. Now, I can't speak for your partner, but your bark ain't this hard."

"Well, Mr. Curtice, guess you don't know me so good after all."

32

When Oatha Wallace arrived, Ezekiel was leaning back on a small shelf in the rock. He'd pulled off his fleece-lined gloves and unbuttoned his slicker and sack coat and vest, unclipped his suspenders, torn open the muslin shirt.

"Where's his rifle?"

"Somewhere i-i-in the snow yonder."

"He ain't got a sleeve gun, do he?"

"Naw, I checked."

Oatha stared at Ezekiel. "He's gut-shot."

"I-I-I-I tried to shoot him in the head, but—"

"Naw, that's fine, Billy. His horns is clipped. Lead ball from a Walker in the bread wallet. Helluva thing. Caught a case a the slow, didn't you, old buscadero?"

Ezekiel watched the steaming black blood leak through his fingers as he tried to put back the gray tube of gut that kept pushing out. He could feel blood running down his legs and into his boots. Some had streamed down the rock and melted a burgundy hole in the snow. He looked up at Oatha, at the boy who'd set him on his sunset trail, and when he spoke, his voice came broken and strained by ragged exhalations. "Bushwhacking, huh? So that's how you operate?"

"Whatever gets it done," Oatha said.

"How much y'all come away with?"

"They's sixty-nine bricks, twenty-two pounds apiece."

"But you done the math."

"Sure, I done it. Just over five hunerd thousand."

Ezekiel nodded. "Maybe you can buy this boy a new gun. That Walker must be forty years old."

Oatha grinned. "And some clothes, too."

Billy blushed. Too poor to afford a greatcoat or a slicker, when he ventured out into winter conditions, his only recourse was to clothe himself in every ratty, moth-eaten garment he owned, so his ensemble comprised layer upon layer of old shirts, threadbare hand-me-down sack coats two

decades old, and a blue frock coat that had barely survived a house fire back in Tennessee, and still bore the black-fringed fire-eaten holes to prove it.

Ezekiel looked at Billy. “You’ve broke your wife’s heart, son.”

“Ain’t ye son. I want his Justins, Oatha. My feet are cold.”

“We’ll discuss the man’s plunder in a bit. You got even a jot a decency in you, boy?”

Ezekiel moaned, “Got-damn.”

“Hurt as bad as they say?” Oatha asked.

“They wasn’t buildin a high line.”

A dense cloud had blown over the pass and begun its rolling descent through the boulder field.

“You wanna go on and tell me, then?” Ezekiel said. “Don’t see what you got to lose now.”

“Tell you what?”

“I know my brother left Silverton with you back in the fall. He wired me before he left. I know it was you, Nathan, and two other men. Then you come into Abandon three weeks later all by yourself, sayin they decided not to go last minute.”

“And you called me a black liar.”

“And I stand by the claim. Christ.” Ezekiel winced.

Oatha tossed his double-barreled hammer shotgun to Billy, waded toward Ezekiel, and knelt before him in the snow.

“Nathan was your brother.”

“My little brother.”

“What the hell. Don’t matter much now, does it? I didn’t wanna ride with ’em, but they caught up to me on the trail to Abandon in early October.”

“It was four a you?”

“That’s right. Started snowin the second afternoon, and it didn’t stop for a week. We’d only packed provisions for three days a travel and we was hungry by the time the snow quit. Didn’t have no webs. Ten miles from anywhere. Six feet a powder on the ground. Imagine tryin to walk any considerable distance in this shit.

“We tried to hunt, but all the game had gone down to winter in the foothills. Never saw so much as a rabbit.

“We was camped at timberline in a stand a dead spruce, and come October’s end, we was starvin. One man run off. Horses died and froze.

Circumstances was dire. The other men had the look a death about ’em already. I weren’t far behind. There was enough snow melted, we coulda walked out if we just had a little strength.

“One mornin, I took my shotgun, so weak, I could hardly stand. Ways out from camp, I fired it into a tree. Started yellin I’d shot a elk. They come a-runnin. Hootin. Hollerin.

“McClurg arrived first, and I shot him. Nathan realized what was happenin, what we had to do, but he didn’t want no part of it. I was left with no choice but to kill him.

“I didn’t cook your brother, though. McClurg was plumpest, least gant up. I roasted his ass. Had both sides. Got my strength up, stowed everthing in a old bear den, and broke camp next mornin. Walked into Abandon three days later.”

Billy stared at Oatha, mouth agape, broken teeth showing, looking more than a little mystified. “You et a man’s backside?”

“Weren’t no face-lickin Thanksgivin dinner. I was starvin, Billy. And this don’t concern you anyhow. Just thought the man deserved to know his brother’s fate.”

In the midst of a cloud, mist blowing past and a few stray flakes of snow, Ezekiel was overrun by a coldness that settled so deep inside him, he knew he’d never be rid of it. He was dying and he thought of Nathan dying, felt a strange connection to his brother in that moment, wondered if he’d felt this alone in that moment before Oatha murdered him.

Ezekiel’s respiration slowed. He tasted blood in his teeth, felt it trickling from the corner of his mouth. He had a terrible thirst, and he trembled with cold as he looked up at Oatha.

“Don’t stare at me that a way,” Oatha warned. “Like you’re lookin at some kind a damn deviant. You lost your brother. I lost all three a mine to the Federals at Malvern Hill. You didn’t have to sit there with Nathan, tellin him about home while he’s near cut in half, everthin pourin out of him. Sight like that gets stamped on your mind, you can fuckin forget about ever gettin shed of it.”

But Ezekiel had already descended back into the canyon, to his little cabin, to Gloria. He saw her in bed, felt her grief, and all the memories of Leadville and the boys and whatever selfish strain of freedom he’d associated with them and had tasted today wilted into the sham they were.

His lips moved, her name on them, and he loved her more, needed her more than he ever had, thought of all the things he'd not said, wondered if she knew them anyway, then reckoned not, because he hadn't known himself until this moment.

He heard a deep unsanded voice. Fought to make his eyes open.

When they did, the boulderfield and mist and men and snow had faded to gray, and a darkness whose identity he well knew had whittled down his periphery of vision, so his whole world seemed to blacken around the edges like a winter-killed rose.

Oatha was only inches from his face now, his eyes such a pale and clouded blue, some might have mistaken him for a blind man.

It took Ezekiel a moment to comprehend the words.

"That man Billy shot. He kilt?" Ezekiel could only nod, utterly stove up. "Who else knows about Bart?" The darkness was closing in. "Boy, you best find the strength to provide a answer."

Just me and Doc.

"Just me and Doc," he whispered, his lips barely moving.

"How'd you know to find us here? Billy's wife? Bessie tell you?"

Tracks.

"Your tracks."

"Yours and the doctor's wife know about all this?" Ezekiel shook his head. "Yeah, that tastes of a lie."

Gloria don't know.

"Well, I can tell you we damn sure ain't takin no chances on a couple a leaky-mouthed bitches, feedin off their range."

Gloria don't know a thing.

"H-h-h-he's sayin somethin, Oatha."

You let her be.

"Well, if he is, I can't hear it."

"I-I-I bet Gloria knows. No tellin who else she's told."

"We'll kill ever man, woman, and child in Abandon if that's what it comes to. You set to see this through, Billy?"

"Y-y-yes, Oatha."

"You sure? Ain't gonna try to crawfish out a this?"

"For a fact."

"Better go on and curl this one up then so we can sail away."

“M-M-M-Oatha, he’s almost dead any—”

“I don’t give a good goddamn how almost dead he is. I ain’t quittin this spot with that star-toter still above snakes. Savvy?”

Ezekiel heard his death sentence, felt a glimmer of relief, the pain beyond anything he’d known, like someone had thrown liquid silver in his guts. He watched Billy pour a sixty-grain powder charge into one of the Colt’s chambers, followed by a wad of paper. The boy used a small built-in ramrod to seat a lead ball.

Ezekiel spent his last thought not on the horror of what might happen to Gloria, or his own inconceivable pain, or all the things he would not ever see or smell or taste again. He spent his last thought on his boy.

The sound of Gus’s laugh.

What it had felt like to cradle him.

The nape of his neck.

With the bore charged, Billy set about fitting a brass cap to the nipple in back of the cylinder.

You was the best thing. You and your mama, and I wished I’d knowed that when I coulda done somethin to preserve it.

Billy waded up to the rock where Ezekiel lay dying, leveled the nine-inch barrel between the man’s eyes. Ezekiel barely heard the hammer thumb back, because the possibility of heaven had dawned on him, and he was thinking how sweet and unexpected a surprise it would be to arrive there after all this, see Gus, sneak up on his boy, tickle his ribs, throw him in the air. And that laugh … *Please, God, let me hear Gus laugh again if You’re real and have any regard—*

33

OLord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before Thee. Let my prayer come before Thee.

The preacher lay shivering in a bank of snow at the base of the boulder field, so far beyond those innocuous, eloquent prayers he'd delivered to his congregation on Sunday mornings, beyond the decorum he'd always reserved for addressing his Savior. He could only manage a silent, desperate psalm.

Incline Thine ear unto my cry. For my soul is full of troubles.

In the distance, a horse snorted. Stephen raised his head, saw Oatha Wallace and Billy McCabe loping through the powder on their mounts, leading a train of burros down from the pass.

And my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

Stephen ducked under the bank and burrowed deep into the snow, taking the cape from his black greatcoat and draping it over his head to keep the powder from falling into his collar.

I am counted with them that go down into the pit. I am as a man that hath no strength.

The preacher sat motionless and buried, his back to the snowbank, watching Russell Ilg's mare wandering between the boulders.

Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom Thou rememberest no more. And they are cut off from Thy hand.

He heard the tinkle of harness bells on the other side of the snowbank, no more than ten feet from where he sat.

Someone said, "Whoa now."

He envisioned Billy and Oatha tugging at their reins.

"Reckon these are Ezekiel's?" Oatha's voice. They were studying his tracks.

"O-o-o-or maybe that horse yonder."

Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.

"Naw, that horse come from farther up. These here are the tracks of a man."

Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and Thou hast afflicted me with all Thy waves.

“I’ll climb down and check it out if ye want, Oatha.”

Stephen closed his eyes.

Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction. Lord, I have called daily upon Thee, I have stretched out my hands unto Thee.

“They was just the two a them, right?”

“Yeah, I think—”

“Think?”

“Th-th-th—”

“You little stutterin greener, you better—”

“They was just the two a them. I know it for a fact. And we saw the other’ns body back there.”

“Well, all right, then. Naw, don’t get down.”

Oatha clicked his tongue and the pack train moved on. When he could no longer hear the harness bells, Stephen staggered out of the drift and brushed the snow from the wool of his coat.

He stood alone on the mountain, a hundred feet below the pass, listening to the wind and the sound of it pushing grains of snow over the surface like sand skimming a beach. He thought of home in the South Carolina low country, and the memory of it filled him with heartsickness in this frozen desolation.

Stephen found Russell’s horse sheltering itself on the lee side of a giant boulder. He swung up into the saddle, quirted the horse on its snow-matted neck, rode upslope in the tracks of the pack train.

At the Sawblade, the wind blew steady and scaldingly cold.

It had scoured out the snow and built a cornice on the north side, allowing Stephen to dismount onto bare rock.

He followed the burro tracks along an icy ledge. Despite the dizzying exposure, he couldn’t stop himself from peering over. He saw a red crater two hundred feet below—one of the burros had lost its footing, gone over, exploded in the snow like a viscera bomb.

The ledge ended at a recess in one of the jagged spires upthrust from the pass like a rotten canine tooth. He spotted an opening at knee-level in the back wall, a small claim hole just wide enough for a man to crawl through.

Stephen loosed the cloth buttons, reached into his coat. He thought he had a match in one of the pockets, but he didn’t find it.

He approached the hole. It went back four feet, then opened into darkness. He crawled in, wriggled himself through the tapering passageway, then finally emerged, the ground solid beneath his feet, though he had no sense of the chamber’s dimensions.

He extended his right foot. It struck something hard.

He removed his gloves, squatted down, reached forward, his fingers grazing the cold gold, bars and bars and bars of it, stacked upon one another in a cube that rose above his knees.

He lifted one of them, held it to the light that drizzled in through the hole, and as he stood in that semidark, staring down at the chunk of yellow metal, he considered the blood that had already been shed for it and wondered how much more was to come.

He thought of all the people in that haunted town two thousand feet below, how they’d endured this brutal wilderness and all its impositions—the cold, the thin air, the loneliness, maddening isolation—for just a fraction of what he held in his hand.

And in that moment, he no longer regarded the residents of Abandon and the thousand other mining camps scattered like bacteria through the West as people of ambition and courage. They were a cold, dirty, desperate, miserable lot. He saw them now so clearly. They had crossed the plains and made homes in these savage mountains and borne their myriad afflictions not because they were brave pioneers pursuing a dream. They had come for no other reason but that their ravenous hearts raged with greed.

The preacher crumpled down in the cave and wept.

STEPHEN.

At the sound of his name, he went rigid with fear.

34

Stephen crawled out of the cave and walked back up to the pass.

Above him, the clouds had broken up, beams of afternoon sunlight passing through, bronzing random patches of forest, summits, ice fields with the strongest light he'd seen in days.

The mare stood waiting for him on the windswept rock.

As he reached her and put his foot into the stirrup, he heard it, though owing to the wind, he couldn't immediately determine from which direction the sound had come. He looked downslope, and with the mist clearing, he could see all the way into the canyon and a line of specks near the Godsend mine—Oatha and Billy and the burros on their way back to Abandon.

He heard it again—a faint howl.

Others joined in, each of varying pitch and duration, like a discordant symphony of owls and geese and baying dogs.

Stephen pulled his foot out of the stirrup and walked to the other side of the pass, stood bracing against the wind, shielding his face with his gloves.

At first, there was little to see. Clouds sailed toward him and over him—mammoth schooners. Fog swirling in the depths below, hiding the long, broadening valley, the lake several miles south, the open country beyond. He'd taken this trail to Silverton once before—much faster than the wagon road, though more dangerous because it required a steep descent along a series of narrow ledges that switchbacked down from the cirque.

Now he gazed at those ledges, observed that the wind had blown them clean of snow, traced their dwindling switchbacks with his finger for several hundred feet until it passed over something that, from his vantage on the pass, resembled a trail of black ants ascending out of the fog.

He stood bewildered, listening to the alien howls until another sound became prevalent—unshod horses pounding the rock.

Out of sheer amazement, he stepped forward and squinted down at what looked to be an entire town on horseback—women in print dresses, suitcoated men, some still wearing their filthy workclothes, and a hatless blonde leading the procession, poorly dressed for the conditions in a bright gold evening gown. As they drew near, he puzzled at their horses' hides, decorated with pagan hieroglyphs depicting wolves, bear, coyote, elk,

eagles, trees, cacti, mountains, clouds, the arc of rivers, and as the riders rounded another switchback, facing him now, he saw that the woman in front wore the painted face of a heathen, and the gold gown was drenched in blood, the original owner's entire scalp having been stitched into the warrior's tonsured head, the curly yellow hair still pinned up in the fashion of the day, and around that heathen's waist hung a belt of sunburned noses and he appeared to be smiling, his bloodstained teeth filed down into razor points, and his horse's mane interwoven with the hair of numerous scalps still warm, still dripping, and those behind him equally outlandish, one rider naked save for cape and bowler, another so caked with blood that he seemed to be rusting, one in nothing but a blue bonnet, one in a shredded corset beaded with eyes, and they bore weaponry of every design and from across the ages—shotgun, rifle, revolver, knife, lance, bow, sword—some holding rocks still smeared with blood and brain, others wielding sharpened human femurs, one gripping a crude mace constructed of oak and leather and shards of quartz, and this parade of demons cackled and groaned, conversing in a strange, unholy tongue that sounded like some ancient form of necromancy.

"God Almighty," said the preacher.

The trail they climbed had no destination but Abandon.

2009

35

Abigail thought she'd broken her back, but then she managed to lift her head and suck in a breath of air, realized she'd only had the wind knocked out of her. She lay on the stairs on her back, wood creaking all around her, threatening to give. Somewhere above, a man groaned. Dust and snow clouded her headlamp's triangle of light. Someone said her name. She looked down at her father sprawled a few steps below.

"You okay?" he whispered. She nodded. June wept above them, and Abigail couldn't determine if the source was grief or pain. She glanced up, saw she'd landed just below the cupola, her headlamp shining into the library, spotlighting the pale, terrified face of June, the woman clutching a bookshelf and standing on the only ribbon of flooring still attached to the struts. With the sky exposed, snow fell into the stairwell column of Emerald House. Abigail lay midway down the third flight of steps. There was a sudden crack, and she watched something break through the ceiling, her light catching on a flash of blue ski jacket streaking past, realized it was Emmett, his body dropping through darkness, crashing into the second flight of stairs, nearly hitting Jerrod, punching a hole through the steps, the second floor, finally slamming into the ground level as June screamed out from the library.

Stu yelled, "Quit moving! You're gonna break this section of floor, too."

Abigail shone her light down and across to the next flight of stairs, where Jerrod and Isaiah clung to the middle section, the top half having been severed from the third floor by Emmett's fall.

Lawrence snapped his fingers. Abigail saw him motioning for her to climb down to him.

She descended carefully, and as she neared him, he reached up, turned off her headlamp.

His mouth pressed against her ear, he whispered, "We're leaving. Step where I step and keep quiet." Lawrence stood slowly. The step he occupied creaked. As he and Abigail moved down toward the third floor, Isaiah's voice rose up from below.

"Stu, where you at?"

"Up here in the library."

“You hurt?”

“Fuckin ribs are killing me. You?”

“Me and Jerrod’re scraped up, but we’ll live. The other two with you?”

“No.”

“*Laaa*rry?” Isaiah purred his name as a beam of light swung through the debris onto the stretch of stairs where Abigail and her father had landed. “I’m not seeing you and the cute bitch.” A red dot appeared on the third flight of steps. “Sound off, motherfucker.”

Abigail could see the bright bulb of Isaiah’s headlamp a few feet away. With the upper portion of the second flight of stairs destroyed, there was no way that he or Jerrod could reach the third floor, but they could sure as hell see them and shoot. He had only to turn around. Lawrence grabbed his daughter’s hand, whispered in her ear, “Follow me.”

They crept around the stairwell toward the west wing, just a narrow corridor of gray rotting wood that seemed to joggle with the motion of Lawrence’s headlamp, the hall lined with doors, some closed, some ajar, most having rusted out of their hinges and toppled over onto the floor. Fifteen feet in, Lawrence stepped on a floorboard that squeaked. They froze, as if to retract the sound, Lawrence switching off his headlamp.

“That you, Lar?” Abigail felt blind, thought of all the scary movies she’d seen, horror novels she’d read, realized nothing even approached this level of fear. She could have dreamed no better nightmare.

“Tell you what,” Isaiah continued. “You do the smart thing, come on back, all’ll be forgiven. But you run? Better not ever let me catch your ass.”

Movement on the second flight of stairs.

“He’s coming,” Abigail whispered.

“But he can’t reach us from those steps.”

She heard a noise, glanced back. It sounded like quiet microexplosions shredding the floor and the ceiling. “What *is* that?” she asked. “Is this wing about to collapse?” The little explosions moved closer: one here, two there. When Lawrence flicked on his headlamp and shone it on the floor, they both saw it pockmarked with tiny holes.

“Shit,” he whispered. “He’s underneath us, shooting up through the floor.”

They ran, surrounded by the muffled *thunk* of rounds passing through the floor and ceiling, decayed wood raining down, the jingle of shell casings

dropping on the second floor like handfuls of pocket change, then a pause, followed by an intense thirty-round burst just ahead. Lawrence pulled Abigail through a doorless doorway, pushed her against the wall, the room small, part of the servants' quarters, boasting only a ruined bed and a wardrobe.

"There's a stairwell at the end of this wing," Lawrence said. "We're gonna take it—"

"But they're right underneath us."

"And getting ready to find out that the end of the second floor's west wing is rotted out. They'll have to go back to the main stairwell. That's the only way down for them."

After another fury of machine-pistol fire, Lawrence said, "He's reloading. Let's go." Abigail followed him back into the corridor, their footfalls noisy on the old wood. She heard someone yell "Fuck!" and wondered if Isaiah had reached the caved-in portion of the second floor. Up ahead, the wing terminated into a sitting area—crumbling furniture and overturned bookshelves grouped around a hearth. Above it all, a chandelier drooped from the ceiling, and through the broken windows, snow streamed in sideways.

Four strides from the sitting area, Abigail's right foot went through.

"Lawrence!" she screamed, up to her elbows, both legs sticking out of the second-floor ceiling. He sprinted back as the wood under her elbows broke. She dropped, but he had a solid grip around her wrists. Abigail looked down past her dangling feet, her headlamp jolted on, shining through a giant hole. The floor cracked under Lawrence's knees.

"I'm about to go through," he grunted, straining to lift her, the machine pistol at work again, ripping through the wood behind Abigail.

"Hurry," she whispered. During a brief reloading silence, Lawrence pulled her up, and they rolled into the sitting area as a slew of bullets eviscerated the spot where Abigail had punched through. They scrambled to their feet, tracking through blown-in snow.

"It's over here," Lawrence whispered, leading her to the northeast corner of the sitting area. "I don't think he can get a clear shot at us in the stairwell."

"Is it safe?"

“Don’t know.” Lawrence took the stairs two at a time. They descended through the second floor, finally emerging onto the ground level, their headlamps blazing through a kitchen replete with giant washbasins, two fireplaces, a brick oven, a clay oven, and numerous cabinets, all surrounding a long butcher-block island. The windows had held their glass, so there was no snow or wind, only silence.

“Kill your headlamp,” Lawrence whispered. They both went dark. Without the aid of light, Abigail couldn’t even see her father standing a foot in front of her.

“This is good,” he said, leading Abigail forward. “We’d see their light if they were coming down the main staircase.” She heard a doorknob turn, hinges grinding.

“It’s pitch-black. How can you see anything at all?”

“I know this mansion very—” Lawrence stopped.

“What is it?”

“I heard something up ahead.”

“What?”

“Wood cracking under a footstep.”

A long moment of silence elapsed, and then Abigail saw the sole point of light in all that smothering darkness. She said, “Oh God,” and Lawrence looked down at his chest, touched the red dot moving in tiny circles around the North Face logo on his parka.

They lunged back into the kitchen as glass fell out of the French doors and rear window. Abigail never heard the shot. Lawrence’s headlamp lighted up. He pulled Abigail toward the washbasins between the ovens, helped her climb onto the counter, footsteps pounding toward them.

“What do I do?” she asked. He pushed her through. Abigail fell outside into the snow. As Lawrence climbed through the windowsill, the French doors burst open, headlamp beams sweeping in a frenzy of movement over the walls of the kitchen.

“Come on!” she screamed, but they dragged her father back into Emerald House.

36

Abigail felt hands seize her, pull her back into the kitchen, jags of glass on the windowsill slicing through Gore-Tex, fleece, thermal underwear, skin, blood running down her left leg as she slammed into the rotting floor. Her headlamp passed over Jerrod and Isaiah, each man holding night-vision goggles, the barrels of their machine pistols steaming in the cold. Isaiah's foot swung through the dark and she heard the breath rush out of Lawrence as he doubled over on the floor. Isaiah knelt before Abigail, slid the knife out of his ankle sheath.

"No," Lawrence hissed, still struggling to breathe.

Abigail tried to get up. Then she lay on her back, the left side of her jaw throbbing and burning, Isaiah sitting on top of her, pinning her shoulders down with the heels of his boots. He unzipped her fleece jacket and pulled her thermal underwear out of her waistband, exposing her bare stomach—ridged like a washboard and heaving in the dark.

"Hold his head, Jerrod. You watching, Lar? I'm gonna cut a hole right here," he tapped Abigail's belly button with the knife point, "and reach in, start yanking stuff out."

When the blade touched her stomach, she went to another place, without sound or feeling. She imagined a Long Island beach, middle of summer. Isaiah's headlamp became the gentle sun.

Her father's voice brought her back. "I lied," Lawrence gasped. "I lied to you, Isaiah." Isaiah still pushed the knife, Abigail sucking in her gut, pressure and pain beginning to build.

"Hear what he's saying?"

"I got ears, Jerrod."

"The gold isn't here," Lawrence rasped. "I'll help you find it. I swear. Just leave her—"

Isaiah suddenly sheathed the knife, stood up, left Abigail shaking on the floor. He lifted Lawrence and slammed him into the oven, the professor's feet off the floor.

"What would you have done?" Lawrence said. "You spend years trying to find something, then someone sweeps in last second to steal it all from you. I couldn't—"

Isaiah rammed him into the brick again, dust showering down from the ceiling.

“Your ass better start making sense in a fucking hurry.”

“That secret room in Bart’s wing is where the gold *was* kept, until Christmas 1893. For a long time, I was sure the bars were in Emerald House. I searched every room, even scoured the south-wing rubble. I’d given up, when I found Gloria Curtice’s diary. Something big was going down on Christmas in Abandon. She wrote that two men—Oatha Wallace and Billy McCabe—had murdered Bart Packer and his servants and made off with a load of gold. Apparently, her husband and some other men rode up toward the mine in pursuit.”

“So fucking what?”

“So … when you’re in a tiny town, dead of winter, and you’ve just stolen two thousand pounds of gold, you have to hide it.”

“Look in my eyes, Larry, and you better have an answer to this. Where’s the gold now?”

“I haven’t found it yet.” Isaiah simply dropped him, slipped a clip out of his belt, popped it into the Glock, and racked the slide. “No, listen. Oatha and Billy had already been prospecting together. They had this claim up at Sawblade Pass. Gloria mentions it in her diary, because Billy’s wife had blabbed to her about it. It would make perfect sense. They stash the gold up there, and first chance they get, it’s a straight shot down the mountain into Silverton. They’re home free and set for life.”

“Then it’s gone, right? They would’ve taken it.”

“Would have, yes. Except, remember, every resident of Abandon disappeared on Christmas Day, so they probably never got the chance.”

“You telling me the gold’s up at the pass?”

“I’m telling you I think that’s where it is, but I haven’t had a chance to explore up there since finding Gloria’s diary. Scott and I had planned to do that during this trip.”

Isaiah paced around the butcher-block island.

“Isai—”

“Thinking, Jerrod.” Three more trips around the island, then Isaiah stopped and looked at his partner. “Go help Stu and that woman down from the library, and get them set up in the foyer.” As Jerrod disappeared into the west-wing stairwell, Isaiah walked over to Abigail and her father, now

huddled together at the base of the brick oven. “You know where this old claim hole is or not, Larry?”

“I think—”

“Motherfucker, let me hear the word *think* come out of your mouth one more—”

“I can find it. I know where to look, and I’ll take you up there at first light, when—”

“First light? Tomorrow?” Isaiah laughed, then reached out, caressed Abigail’s face with the back of his hand. “I don’t think you grasp the situation, Lar. This is your daughter, right? Well, know this. If I don’t have these gold bars in my possession *before* first light, you’re gonna watch me do terrible things to your little girl before I go to work on you.”

37

The storm wound up into such a flood of snow, they lost sight of Emerald House just fifty yards out from the portico, Stu and June staying behind in the mansion's foyer.

Within the hour, Isaiah, Jerrod, Lawrence, and Abigail had reached the mine, the professor leading them beyond the snow-blasted remnants of the mill to the canyon's end, where they started the long, steep climb to the pass.

Jerrod had roped Abigail to her father in an effort to impede an easy escape, and she was trying not to cry in the face of the surreal horror of it all—the throbbing gash above her left eye, the blood sliding down her leg from that deep cut on the back of her thigh—when a crushing realization sunk in: *We're going to die in these mountains.*

She could find no reason to believe these men would ever let them live.

Worst-case scenario—they don't find the gold bars, and we die horribly. Best case—they find the gold and we die quickly. Is that what I have to hope for? A bullet in the back of my head?

Lawrence put his arm around her.

She shoved it away.

Five hundred feet up, they stopped to rest, sitting in six inches of powder on a rock outcropping, Abigail between her father and Isaiah, watching the snowflakes swarm in the beam of her headlamp, all four of them practically panting in the thin air.

In a lull between wind gusts, Lawrence looked over at Jerrod, said, "So Scott told you what we were looking for up here? Was he gonna cut you in but you double-crossed him? That the deal?"

As Jerrod passed a water bottle down the line, he shook his head. "Month ago, I left Hinterlands, Inc. for the day, got to my Bronco, and realized I'd forgot my keys. When I came back in, Scott was on the phone, feet propped on his desk, talking to you about the logistics of transporting a ton of gold through seventeen miles of wilderness. It got my attention."

"So all of this, two people dead, 'cause you forgot your keys."

"Ain't life some shit?" Isaiah said. "Tell me, Larry. I did some research on this ghost town before I came out here, but since you the professor, what

the fuck happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you got a theory or something.”

“Yeah.”

“So share that shit.”

“No, I don’t—”

“I ain’t asking. What you think wiped this town out?”

Lawrence hesitated, said, “I figured an act of God.”

“You mean something supernatural?”

“No, I mean I thought God wiped them out. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, fire and brimstone raining from the sky, the angel of darkness. Nothing else made sense.”

“That’s cold.”

“Yeah, well—”

“But I like it. Read the Old Testament. Back in the day, God used to do that shit all the time.”

Abigail took her drink of water, glancing at Isaiah. Keep him talking. Make a connection beyond victim-captor. If you don’t humanize yourself, you’re dead.

“Could I ask you something, Isaiah?” she said.

“Sure, we can friend up for a little while. You know, I’m actually a great guy. You met me under any other circumstance, you’d probably love my ass.”

Strangely enough, she believed him, imagined meeting him at her local gym, developing a flirtatious banter on neighboring rowing machines.

“Were you and your partners in Iraq together?”

Isaiah swiped the water bottle out of her hand, took a drink, wiped his mouth.

“Force Recon.”

“Desert Storm or—”

“Iraqi Freedom.”

“I just wondered, because on the hike in, I noticed Jerrod has post-traumatic stress—”

“We all got that shit.”

Jerrod turned, and she could see his eyes narrowed under the bulb of his headlamp, considered the possibility that she’d misread him, that he might

be capable of killing her.

“Why would you talk to her about that?”

“Chill out, my man.”

“You saw combat?” Abigail asked.

“Christ, Isaiah. Tell her to shut the—”

Don’t shut down on me.

“Yeah, we got into some shit.”

“What happened?”

“Our unit slipped into southern Iraq in the weeks leading up to the major offensive.”

“Ize, not fucking around here. What are you—”

“Jerrod, my therapist says it’s healthy to talk about it. Bad for you to hold this shit in.”

“You’re crazy.” Jerrod got up and walked away.

“The navy had bombed hell out of a Republican Guard division about a hundred twenty-five miles southeast of Baghdad, in the city of Kut. We were sent in a day later with the objective of confirming that no enemy combatants or artillery had survived the attack, greasing the skids for the invasion.

“Our CH-forty-six set down on this ridge just before dawn, and soon as we touched ground, we started taking heavy mortar and machine-gun fire. As the chopper was lifting off, an RPG hit it. Boom. Game over. It’s me and five men versus fifty Republican Guard soldiers. We’re pinned down. Majorly fucked. Half our unit’s killed in the first three minutes. Me, Jerrod, and Stu surrendered, and that’s when the shit went down.

“Woke up chained to a chair in a room without windows and with concrete walls so purple, they looked like they’d been primed with blood. These two interrogators went to work on us for the next week. I could hear Jerrod and Stu screaming in the adjacent rooms. That was the worst part. Listening to them, knowing what was coming.”

Abigail touched his arm, looked into his brown eyes. *Keep him talking.*

“What did they do to you, Isaiah?”

He smiled. “Oh, lots of things. Those were some ingenious motherfuckers. They had this metal cot wired to a couple car batteries—that was loads of fun. You noticed the scars on Jerrod’s face? Did that with acid. My stomach looks like someone glued a bunch of spaghetti to it. They don’t

tell you when you sign up for the marines that you might get gang-banged by a bunch of towelheads. I told them everything I knew. Spilled all my secrets. Even made up some shit they wanted to hear. They were on the verge of flaying us when the good guys showed up. Team of Rangers got us out of there."

Abigail stared up at him, his face surprisingly calm and expressionless in the glare of her light.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," she said, "but I guess what doesn't kill you—"

"What don't kill you makes you a mean-ass motherfucker."

"Can I tell you something, Isaiah?"

"What?"

"It's nothing like what you experienced, but I'm afraid right now. Afraid when you get this gold, you're gonna kill me, because I've seen your face and know something about you. Will you tell me if that's what's going to happen, so I can at least begin to prepare for it?"

Jerrod returned, said, "Think we could end the therapy session, get the fuck up this mountain?"

"Hey, I needed to do this. Shari says I don't talk enough about it, so I'm practicing. You should unload, brother. Shit's empowering."

"You ain't right, man."

Isaiah grinned at Abigail. "Don't think Jerrod ain't holding his shit together. He's doing okay. Our man, Stu, on the other hand—sad, sad motherfucker. Just fell apart. Wife left him when he came back. Took his little girl. He lost everything. How many times he try to kill himself, Jer?"

"Three."

"And, as you probably gathered, he's a raging alky. I know this gold ain't a cure-all, and we still gonna be fucked up rest of our lives, but don't we deserve a little compensation after all we been through? Ain't like Uncle Sam could give a fuck."

"Can we go now? You need a hug first?"

Isaiah chuckled, shot Jerrod the bird. "Yeah, let's hit it."

Never answered my question.

Before Abigail stood, she noticed something at her feet, reached down, lifted the light, brittle skull out of the snow. She shone her headlamp onto the braincase of some animal, a horse perhaps, browned and cracking, filled

with bits of rock and bone fragments that rattled inside like sand in a seashell, and she imagined some carefree hiker, a half century from now, holding her sun-bleached skull in his hands, speculating with his companions about her fate.

38

Lawrence and Abigail stood at thirteen thousand feet, already a foot of snow at the pass and the wind screaming beyond comprehension, so hard that they could lean into it at forty-five-degree angles and be held upright. They watched their captors trudge upslope, wearing those acrylic black masks again to shield their faces from the stinging cold.

Lawrence waved them over and shouted above the wind, “I wanna explore this side first! There’s a recess in the cliff that looks very interesting!”

Isaiah gave a thumbs-up, and they worked their way over from the saddle to the base of the palisade, a series of broken crags that, from Abandon, resembled an old saw blade cutting at the sky. When she saw where he was leading them, Abigail grabbed hold of her father’s arm. Accessible from the pass, a ledge traversed the escarpment. To her right—vertical snow-glazed rock that lifted beyond the range of her headlamp. To her left—a stomach-churning drop into darkness. She shone her light over the edge and watched snowflakes swirling and tumbling down through the beam, losing sight of them long before they reached the bottom.

Near the pass, the ledge was four feet wide—broad enough for Abigail and Lawrence to walk abreast. But it narrowed as it crossed the face of the palisade, and Abigail had to follow behind her father, hugging the cliff as with each step she punched through a foot of fresh powder.

The ledge went on and on.

It narrowed to three feet, then two.

Toward the end, the ledge sloped down just enough so that Abigail’s boots would slide over the icy rock toward the edge if she lingered in one spot too long.

Suddenly, Lawrence turned and pulled her underneath an overhang, out of the snow, out of the wind, the rock dry. Abigail’s face had gone numb, and she took off her gloves, pressed her palms into her cheeks.

“Listen, Abby,” Lawrence whispered. “I’m gonna try to—”

Isaiah and Jerrod emerged from the ledge and ducked into the overhang.

They collapsed onto the rock, their black parkas blanched with snow.

“This it, Larry?”

“This is the place I wanted to check out, yeah.”

“Don’t look like much to me. You ain’t fucking around again—”

“How about that? Does that look like something?”

Isaiah aimed his headlamp at the back wall, the corners of his mouth lifting, his bright, perfect teeth shining their malevolent smile. “Now, that does look like some shit.”

Isaiah got up, walked over to the opening in the rock. He squatted down, peered inside.

“How far’s it go back?” Jerrod asked.

“About four feet.”

“Can you see anything?”

“Nah, this tunnel slants down and to the left.” He put his light on Lawrence. “You been in here before, Lar?”

“No. I’d planned to come up here on some downtime during our three days in Abandon.”

Isaiah pushed back his hood and pulled off his face mask. From underneath the overhang, the wind sounded like a fleet of jet engines as it tore across the pass. “See, part of me’s thinking that you might be a conniving motherfucker. You feel me?”

“No, I don’t *feel* you.”

“You’re telling me that’s an old claim hole?”

“Far as I know.”

“Well, I’m all for sending your ass in first, but what if it’s in fact a cave? And you just disappear once you get inside? Only one of us can fit through that tunnel at a time.”

“Look, I have no idea what’s in there,” Lawrence said. “I hope for our sake it’s a shitload of gold. Based on my research, everything I know about Oatha and Billy, I have a feeling that’s exactly what we’re going to find. But I’m not leaving Abigail, so you don’t have to—”

“All right, tell you what. We’ll send Abigail in. Jerrod, undo Larry’s end of the rope and whip up one of your fancy knots for the lady.”

It took Jerrod less than a minute to untie Lawrence and prepare a harness for Abigail.

“Second time you’ve done this,” she said as he ran the rope around her thighs. “Remember yesterday?” He’d taken off his mask, and when he looked up, her headlamp shone on the crescent moon scars that ruined his

face. In spite of everything, she found it impossible not to feel a flicker of compassion for what he'd endured in Iraq.

"She's ready," he said.

Abigail approached the opening and shone her headlamp inside.

"What's the story on there being bad air in there?" she asked.

"Guess you'll let us know, huh?"

She climbed in and wormed her way through the tunnel, arriving after ten seconds in a small chamber roughly the size of her studio, but with a much lower ceiling—just barely over six feet. Isaiah crawled through the passage now, and she moved away from the opening as he stepped down into the chamber. "Get your ass in here, Larry!"

They shone their headlamps over the bare rocky floor, across the walls, the low, jagged ceiling. Isaiah walked the circumference of the room, returning to the opening of the tunnel just as Lawrence emerged. He grabbed the professor by the scruff of his yellow parka and dragged him out into the chamber.

"Fuck," Lawrence said.

"Fuck is right. What the fuck, Larry?"

Lawrence struggled to his feet. He walked to the farthest corner and squatted down, carefully lifting the only man-made object in the chamber.

"What you got?"

Lawrence held up the scraps of an old burlap sack. "This is what the gold was carried in. Probably used a team of burros to bring it to the pass."

"So what's the good news? There a secret passage? I push one of these rocks and the treasure room opens up? Larry? I know you got some silver lining for me."

As Lawrence stood up and looked over at Isaiah, Abigail saw something in her father's eyes she'd not seen until now: fear, bewilderment, a hint of real desperation. "This *is* where they brought the gold. I'm sure of it. It was stored right here on Christmas Day in 1893. Now it's gone. So they must have come back and taken off with it after they'd murdered most of the townspeople. I feel more strongly than ever that it was Oatha and Billy who somehow wiped out Abandon in an unprecedented act of mass—"

"See, I don't give a fuck about all that."

"What else do you want from me? At this point, I've done everything I can." Isaiah closed the distance between himself and Lawrence. "I'm not

jerking you off here, Isaiah. I could lead you on some wild-goose chase all night long. ‘Oh, I think it’s here. Well, maybe they hid it there. Okay, one more place to look.’ I’m not doing that. This is the honest, stone-cold truth. Now that I know it’s not here, I don’t have the first fucking clue where the gold is. May not even be in the San Juans.”

Isaiah just stared at him, and Abigail could sense the internal debate going on behind his chocolate eyes, knew their fate was being decided, thought how Isaiah’s silence was so much more horrifying than his noisy stream of threats.

He knelt down slowly, deliberately, lifted the right pant leg of his waterproof trousers.

Lawrence was trembling now, his hands behind his back.

He left his gun outside with Jerrod, but not the knife. He’s going to kill my father. Then murder me. What a perfect place to leave our bodies.

Isaiah unsnapped the ankle sheath, and as he grasped the knife, Lawrence’s right arm swung out in a wide arc that ended in a muffled cracking collision with the side of Isaiah’s head.

Isaiah groaned, fell over unconscious.

Lawrence staring at the fist-size rock still gripped in his hand, half-stunned, as if in disbelief that his arm had done this thing.

39

Lawrence knelt down and unclipped the sheath from Isaiah's ankle. He cut the rope that linked Abigail's harness to the overhang, and as he slid the sheathed knife into his pocket, Abigail ran her hands up and down Isaiah's legs, his arms, and around his waist before suddenly stopping. She unzipped his parka, reached into an inner pocket, and plucked out an olive-colored ball the size of an apple and weighing just under a pound.

A band of yellow nomenclature ran across the equator of the steel sphere:

GRENADE. HAND. FRAG. DELAY. M67. COMP. B

She looked up at her father, their eyes going wide at the same time. She turned the grenade slowly in her hand, examining the safety pin, the lever.

"What's going on in there, Isaiah?" Jerrod shouted through the tunnel. "We happy?"

Abigail leaned forward, whispered, "You ever handled one of these?" He shook his head. "You know how it works?"

Lawrence touched the safety pin. "I know you pull this out, and as long as your hand is holding the lever down, I think it won't explode."

"You *think?* What's your knowledge based on?"

"You don't want to know."

"Tell me."

"Rambo."

"Isaiah!" Jerrod shouted. "You're killing me, man!"

Abigail said, "Well, he's gonna be coming through that hole momentarily. You wanna try to fight him with the knife you just took?"

"He'd kill me."

"Then we have to throw this grenade."

They walked over to the tunnel opening.

Jerrod's headlamp illuminated the rock midway through from the other side.

"Isaiah!" he shouted. "I'm coming in, all right?"

"No, Jerrod," Abigail said. "We're on our way out."

Lawrence motioned for her to yank the pin.

“You find the gold?”

“We didn’t find it.”

Abigail slipped her finger through the ring and pulled out the safety pin. “How long do we have?” she whispered. “Once I throw it? Is it five seconds, or three?”

“I don’t know.” Her hand had begun to shake, knuckles white from the death grip she had on the M67’s striker lever, lines of sweat trickling down her forehead and into her eyes. She blinked away the sting.

“If it’s five seconds, Jerrod might have time to throw it back in here at us,” she said.

“Isaiah? The fuck’s going on? Everything cool?”

Isaiah moaned again.

“When I let go of this,” Abigail said, “we dive into that corner and cover our heads.”

“Make a good throw. We don’t want it rolling back in here.”

“Isaiah! You okay?” Abigail realized she’d been holding her breath. “I’m coming in!”

Abigail cocked her arm back and let the M67 fly. They lunged into the corner, Abigail’s face crushed into the rocky floor. Lawrence sprawled on top of her. She shut her eyes, listening to the grenade ricochet off the rock as it bounced through the tunnel.

She heard Jerrod say “Shit.”

Two seconds of silence, then the ground shook and shards of the ceiling fell down.

Abigail said, “Lawrence? You okay?”

“Yeah. You?”

“My ears are ringing.” She sat up, turned on her headlamp. The chamber had filled with a haze of dust and smoke. They got to their feet, moved over to the tunnel.

“I don’t hear him,” Lawrence whispered. “Think he had time to throw it over the edge?”

They heard something behind them, and both turned, their headlamps spotlighting Isaiah, who was trying to sit up.

“We have to go,” she said. “We’ll shoot him with Jerrod’s gun.” Abigail followed Lawrence back through the tunnel into thickening smoke. As she came out under the overhang, she could see that her throw had been perfect.

Her headlamp shone on the rock, blasted black from the detonation, steel fragments everywhere—under her feet, embedded in the stone.

But no Jerrod and no blood.

“Where is he?” Abigail whispered, the words hardly out of her mouth when Jerrod appeared around the corner from the narrow ledge, walking toward them unscathed, a red dot moving back and forth between their chests, Lawrence and Abigail backpedaling toward the far edge of the overhang, snow blowing in, squeezing out the residual smoke.

“Isaiah!” Jerrod hollered at the opening in the rock. “Is he alive?”

Before Abigail could answer, Isaiah’s voice boomed back.

“You got ’em?”

“Yeah.”

“Motherfucker clocked me with a rock.” Isaiah climbed out of the tunnel.

“I almost ate shrapnel,” Jerrod said. “Missing anything? You didn’t hear your M sixty-seven go off?”

“I was out cold.”

“Yeah, I’m standing here hollering through the tunnel, and you aren’t answering, and just when I’m starting to think maybe something’s not right, this grenade comes banging through. Dropped right where you stand.”

“No shit.”

“I didn’t know if it had been cooked off, so I didn’t have time to throw it over the cliff.”

“What’d you do?”

“Hauled ass around the corner and prayed to God that skinny ledge wouldn’t break up underneath me.”

Isaiah turned his attention to Lawrence and Abigail. He smiled, severe pain in his eyes. “Damn, Larry, cute bitch, you bad motherfuckers you. Almost took out a couple of marines. That would have been some shit. Ah, damn.”

“You all right?” Jerrod asked.

Isaiah bent over, shook his head as if to gauge the pain. “I think he fucked me up serious. Put your light here.” Jerrod inspected the side of his partner’s head. “How’s it look?”

“Nasty bruise. How’s it feel?”

“Like a monster migraine.”

“You’ve probably got a concussion.”

“Where’s my Glock?” Jerrod lifted the nylon strap over his head and Isaiah grabbed his machine pistol by its long magazine, staggered toward them, wincing with each step.

“Abby,” Lawrence said, “do exactly what I say, right when I say, no matter how crazy it sounds.”

Lawrence took hold of his daughter’s hand, the backs of their boots only inches from the edge and Isaiah less than five feet away.

“Jump.”

40

Abigail raced feet first down a forty-degree slope. She'd lost her father's hand on impact, but she could hear him yelling at her from above. "Get on your stomach, Abby! Dig in! Stop yourself!" Fifty feet below, she saw where the slope ended and dropped over a cliff. Now she rolled onto her stomach, snow rushing under her parka in a spray of freezing powder. She kicked in her boots. "Your elbows!" Lawrence shouted. Abigail dug in her elbows, slowed to a halt, gasping, shivering. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the cliff edge less than five feet beyond the soles of her boots, felt a queasiness in her stomach, her depth perception skewed by vertigo, right leg badly quaking—the only appendage keeping her on the mountain.

Upslope, Lawrence's headlamp shone down on her. "Climb back to me!" he yelled. "Make sure you've got purchase with each step." Her face ached with cold. She wiped away the powder and started to climb toward her father, taking her time, kicking steps in the smooth old ice under the new-fallen snow. As the adrenaline rush waned, her tailbone began to throb. Lawrence reached down, grabbed her hand, pulled her up onto a boulder.

"You in one piece?" he asked. His pack lay open in the snow and he was cinching the last strap of a crampon onto his boot.

"My tailbone kills. It's cracked, or worse."

"I busted up my right ankle."

"That was insane, Lawrence."

"We were dead otherwise. I knew it was only a thirty-foot fall. I just crossed my fingers and hoped the slope was steep enough and had enough snow to cushion our landing."

Abigail peered up into the darkness, spotted two points of light somewhere above, obscured by the blizzard. "Turn off your headlamp," she whispered. "I see their lights."

Voices tumbled down from the overhang, vague but audible: "Snow's coming down too hard and my beam's weak. How many clips you got left?"

"Two. Let's just spray the fuckers."

Lawrence whispered, "We gotta move right now. Follow me." It was only five steps upslope to the base of the cliff. They reached it, flattened

themselves against the wall of rock, and waited. From above came the sound of slides racking.

Then the machine pistols murmured. Abigail could hear the bullets striking ice and rock a few yards downslope. It went on for some time—random bursts across the slope, one of which came within two feet of the cliff base where they hid. It finally stopped, everything quiet save the wind. Jerrod's voice: "Well, that was a waste of ammo."

Isaiah: "How you feeling, Jerrod? Strong and big-balled?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your ass better be right behind me."

Something crashed into the snow thirty feet downslope.

"Goddamn!" Isaiah screamed.

Jerrod landed several feet beyond, shouted, "Fuck, I can't stop!"

"Jerrod, try to—"

"Fuck!"

"Stick your knife in the snow!"

"I can't reach—" There was a long, fading scream. Lawrence began to climb down, Abigail following close behind. They reached the boulder, turned on their headlamps. Twenty feet below, Isaiah clung to the slope's steepest pitch, struggling to find an edge on the ice.

"Wait here," Lawrence whispered.

"No, I'm coming with you."

Lawrence tapped his boot. "I've got crampons. You don't. Wanna end up like Jerrod?"

Abigail watched her father work his way down.

Isaiah smiled when he saw him coming, said, "Larry, you must have cantaloupe-size nuts. You'd have made a helluva soldier, because that jumping off the cliff shit was pure badass."

"Where's your gun?"

"The strap's twisted around behind my back. I can't reach it without slipping."

Lawrence squatted down by Isaiah's head, jammed his left crampon into the ice.

"I was thinking, Larry. Wanna call it square?"

"No, Lawrence," Abigail said.

“Man, I just wanna get the fuck off this mountain, home to my family. You understand.”

“Give me your hand,” Lawrence said.

As he reached up, Lawrence stomped his right crampon onto Isaiah’s left shoulder. Isaiah’s boots lost their purchase and he slipped down the ice along the same path Jerrod had blazed, making no effort to self-arrest, just staring upslope, his eyes never leaving Lawrence.

“You better hope this fucking kills me,” he said, and disappeared over the edge.

41

Abigail gripped her father's arm as they traversed the mountain, moving at a crawl on a fifty-degree slope, Lawrence taking his time to thrust the teeth of his crampons deep into the ice, since they bore the weight of two.

"I would have liked to have seen their bodies," Abigail said. "Just to be sure."

"Yeah, but way too risky to edge up to the cliff and look over. We might have joined them. Trust me, they're either dead or wishing they were."

They pushed on, Lawrence's dimming headlamp doing little to guide their way. After awhile, he stopped. They'd left the steepest stretch of ice several hundred feet back.

"This isn't good," he said. "We should've run into our old tracks by now. I was hoping to follow them back into the canyon. That's the only safe way down."

They went on, Abigail covering her face with the hood of her Moonstone jacket, unsettled by the disturbing numbness that had begun to diffuse through her cheek from a patch of burning cold under her left eye. Every step sparked a needle of white-hot pain that shot from the tip of her tailbone up into her throat. She'd begun to cry when Lawrence said, "Thank God."

Abigail looked up. Through blowing snow, she glimpsed a two-story building perched on the edge of a cliff. "What is that place?" she asked. "Are we back at the mine?"

"No, we're a thousand feet above it. That's the ruins of the Godsend's upper boardinghouse. Forty men used to live up here, so they'd have easy access to the mine's upper reaches, where all the richest ore deposits were located. Oatha Wallace lived here."

"So is it good that we found it, or—"

"It means I at least know where we are, and I can get us down to the canyon floor from here. Come on, let's get out of the storm."

The exterior of the boardinghouse stood in dire disrepair, the wood spongy and soft, the porch overgrown with moss, animals having gnawed partway through the support beams.

The ground floor was bisected into two rooms by a hall that linked the front door to the back porch. The west door frame opened into the kitchen

and dining hall, its floor rotted through. All that remained were a couple of cookstoves, four benches, a barrel, and the remnants of a screened cage where the food had been stored to keep it safe from rodents.

Abigail and Lawrence picked their way through the debris of a fallen staircase and turned into the living room. The furniture—rustic handmade pieces—still survived, and aside from a hole in the northeast corner, the flooring was largely intact. As they collapsed before a stone fireplace in the back corner, Abigail said, “I think I have frostbite on my face.”

Lawrence removed his pack, got up again, limped over to a table in the middle of the room, its surface gray with age, still encased in bark. “You didn’t see me do this,” he said, then lifted one of the chairs and smashed it over the table. He carried an armload of broken wood to the fireplace and went to work arranging it on the rusted grate. From the emergency kit in his pack, he took a bar of trioxane compressed fuel and a plastic matchbox. “This may catch the whole place on fire,” he warned. Lawrence struck a match, held it to the fuel. Soon the fire starter glowed and then the old wood began to pop and hiss, flames licking up between the stones for the first time in more than a hundred years.

Abigail scooted up to the edge of the hearth and extended her hands toward the warmth. “Thank you,” she said. Her father had taken off his parka, and he inspected her face by firelight. “Is it bad?” she asked.

“It’s just the top layer of skin that’s frostbitten. It may always be sensitive to cold, but no serious damage. That gash above your eye looks worse than anything.”

Abigail stared into the flames, shadows playing on the warped-board floor, the raw, unfinished walls. The accumulation of everything was pressing down on her, a meltdown coming, though she knew she didn’t have the luxury of falling apart just yet.

“What’s upstairs?” she asked.

“Just a big room with a stove in the middle and twenty built-in wooden bunks.”

A pile of rat-chewed paper lay in a stack near the hearth. Abigail picked up an old catalog, thumbed through the brittle pages. She saw an advertisement for a wedding dress with a check mark by it, wondered if the miner had ever gotten home to marry his love, or if he’d disappeared with the rest of Abandon. She noticed some writing on the nearest wall.

“Who would come up here and defile this place?”

“That’s not vandalism, Abby.” Lawrence crawled over and shone his light on the tiny scrawl. “Some of the miners wrote this. You can tell because it was done with pencil, and the handwriting isn’t like ours. It’s very small and fine, almost like calligraphy.”

Abigail, too sore, too warm to move closer, said, “What’s it say?”

“Well, this is just a column of numbers. Over here, someone wrote, ‘John owes Bill two dollars.’ Below that one, ‘This is hell.’ ”

“What’s that drawing a couple feet above your head?”

Lawrence stood. “How lovely. I haven’t seen this one. It’s a miner’s Nellie. Someone sketched a woman’s face. You see a lot of these in boardinghouses, since the men were so lonely up here… . Abby.” He looked back at her. “I had no idea he was gonna kill Emmett.”

“I know you didn’t. But you and Scott did drag us all into this shit. You did do that.”

“Look, the real reason I contacted you wasn’t for this stupid ghost hunt. It was for the gold. The plan was to locate it on this trip, maybe take a few bars out with us, come back later for the rest. I wanted to share finding it with you.”

“So you just used Emmett and June for their backcountry pass?”

“You have no idea how hard it is to get legal access to this box canyon, and they needed a guide anyway. Abby, I was gonna take care of you. Of your mother.”

“The time when we needed you passed a lot of years ago.”

“I know.” Lawrence sat down beside his daughter. “What did your mother think of your coming out here to see me?”

“Furious at first that you’d … after all this time … I tried to make her see it wasn’t a betrayal, just something I needed to do.”

“May I share something with you?”

He unlaced his boots, removed his wet socks, propped his bare feet on the hearth. “I was having my morning coffee the day you arrived in Durango, and I had this vision. Least I think that’s what it was. I was a few years older. A little slower. Little whiter. Through some unexpected windfall, I was living in a vast mansion up in the mountains north of town. The house had been built in an aspen grove near a river.

“It was early June, and around midday there was a knock at the front door. I walked through the foyer with a big grin on my face because I knew who it was. I was expecting them. This beautiful family stood on my doorstep—my daughter, her husband, their two kids, Molly and Larry. My daughter and I …” Lawrence cleared the emotion from his throat, spoke more softly as he continued. “We embraced, nothing held back. I shook hands with her husband, and he called me ‘Dad,’ and my two grandchildren ran inside and tackled me to the floor. See, this family had come to stay for a while. They had a whole wing of the mansion to themselves, and it was one of those perfect Colorado summers. I taught Larry to fly-fish in the river, and Molly loved to swim, so some days it was just the two of us, and I’d take her pool jumping at Cascade Creek, swimming at Haviland.

“In July, when the wildflowers peaked, we all hiked up to Engineer Meadow, and the flowers were more spectacular than they’d been in years. I showed my grandchildren how to identify the blooms. We even picked a bouquet for their mother.

“The evenings were best. After the kids had gone down, we’d have dinner on the back porch. Candles, wine, lots of laughter, watching the alpenglow fade out on the Needles, and then came the stars, and you couldn’t believe how many there were, and there was no bad history, no pain, and, Abby, you looked at me across the table like I was someone you loved.

“I came out of this vision or dream, whatever you wanna call it, overcome by a devastating emptiness, a sense of total loss. I’ve lived alone in Durango, in a two-bedroom Victorian on Third Avenue, going on twenty years now. I don’t have close friends. There are acquaintances, a brother I talk to on the phone once a year on Christmas morning. Occasional dates, but no real love life. My work’s been my life and love. I’ve demanded absolute freedom, lived on my terms, and I …” His eyes were welling up. “I’m just now, at fifty-two years old, beginning to understand what the price of my freedom is. And it’s this. I’ll never have a summer like that one I imagined a few days ago.”

The fire roared now, its heat thawing Abigail’s face, causing an itchy burn in her left cheek. “Lawrence,” she said, “that’s a real sad story. But there’s something you’re missing, and maybe if you figured it out, you might be on your way to changing some things.”

“What am I missing, Abby?”

She looked at his purple right eye, the line of dried blood cracking down his cheek like old plaster. “It’s still all about you. What *you* lost. What *you* won’t ever get to experience. It’s about *you* getting old, feeling empty. I was four when you left, and I didn’t hear from you again until you wrote me about this trip. Not on birthdays. Not on Christmas. Do you know I believed I’d done something to make you leave us? That it was somehow my fault?”

“Abby, you have to know that—”

“And that in some deep and broken part of me, I still believe that? You left us. Mom never married. Practically holed herself up in that house for years, thinking you’d come back. Maybe if I’d had a brother or a sister, it wouldn’t have been so god-awful lonely. When I got into Columbia, you know she had to come to New York with me? ’Cause I couldn’t leave her in Baltimore? ’Cause she had nothing? No one? I didn’t spend college in a dorm. I lived with my mother in a tiny Brooklyn apartment, through two suicide attempts, three commitments, every second spent studying or working so we could eat, so we’d have heat in the winter, waking up, middle of the night sometimes, hearing her talking in the dark as I stood at her door, realizing it was you she was talking to, like you were lying in bed with her. Like you loved her. Even speaking for you. Do you know what that’s like? To hear your mother re-enacting the first time you two met? Fantasizing about a man who’d left her twenty years ago? Look, Mom’s better now, and I’m a big girl, got my own life. This isn’t about me crying for the daddy I never had. But I wish you could’ve been there with me, just one of those nights, seen what you turned her into.”

Lawrence drew back. He got up and walked over to the empty window frame. Several rocking chairs creaked out on the back porch, pushed by the wind. Lawrence looked back at his daughter. Abigail stared up at her father. She wanted to see his face streaked with firelit tears. Wanted to catch just a glimmer of self-loathing or shame in her father’s eyes, though it wouldn’t have changed much. But it might’ve been a start.

Lawrence had gone hard. He scowled, as if deeply offended, and in the light of the flames, his face appeared faintly grotesque and very old.

1893

42

Oatha Wallace walked into the saloon without bothering to shed his oilskin slicker or knock the snow from his stovepipe boots, tracking great clumps of ice and powder as he crossed the board floor. Lana Hartman sat at the piano, working quietly through the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata.

The young deputy still snored in drunken bliss beside the stove, wrapped in a bearskin robe, a spittoon between his legs.

"First rattle out a the box with some irrigation," Oatha said.

Joss set up a tumbler and a glass of beer as he reached the bar.

"What are you doin here?" she whispered. "Thought you wasn't comin back 'til tomorrow."

"There was a big goddamn spoke in the wheel."

"What?"

"Unexpected company up at the Sawblade. We was followed by Ezekiel Curtice and that doctor."

"Russ Ilg?"

"Didn't catch the man's name, but we had quite a scrape. Billy shot 'em both, and that makes seven dead in less than a day. We need to quit the flats right now, while the gate's open."

Joss took out her makings, rolled a cigarette, pulled a punk from her prayer book—just a sulfur-tipped splinter of wood. She lifted her shirt, struck the match against the middle button of her canvas trousers, then lit the quirly, smoke ascending into the bleary light of the kerosene lamp above the bar. Oatha took up the glass and drank, chased it.

"He's fair sobered," Joss whispered, motioning to the deputy. "Wasn't gonna get him really stewed 'til tomorrow, like we discussed."

"You got that big bowie under the bar? One you almost shoved through my ear this mornin?"

Joss grinned, blew a stream of smoke into his face.

"That should get the job done."

"What about …" Joss cocked her head toward Lana.

"You ain't got all attached to that she stuff, have you?"

"You ain't touchin her, Oath. Let me just send her on home."

“Fine.”

“What about Billy?”

“What about him?”

“He comin with us?”

“Sure, he’s comin. Gonna try to straighten that balky bitch a his out first.”

“And if she don’t straighten?”

“Well, she knows, and he knows that won’t stand.”

“You reckon that scrub’ll kill his wife? Just like that?”

“I think you might be surprised.”

“I’m still gonna be the one to deal with him for goin rough on ol’ Bart. You ain’t forgot that, have you?”

“Jesus Christ, kinky, cut the boy some—”

“*You* ain’t got all attached to your pard, have you?”

“No, but Billy done all right today. Ain’t no scissorbill. Boy’s got some sand. Kilt both those men up there like it weren’t nothin, shined, and he’s payin a visit to their wives as we speak.”

“And I give a solitary shit why?”

“Look, we’ll need his help gettin out a town, loadin up everthin at the pass. Drivin the burros down the other side. You can ’dobe-wall him in the tall timber, ’fore we get to Silverton. Don’t you worry those pretty black eyes.”

“Condescend to me one more time.”

“Christ, you’re in a sod-pawin mood.”

“And what if his wife and kid come along?”

“Well, I guess they won’t see Silverton, neither.”

“I want no part a killin that little girl.”

“Then you’ll have no part of it. Pour me another’n. Oh, fuck it, just give me the bottle.” Joss pushed it forward and Oatha thumbed off the cork, swallowed two mouthfuls.

“I gotta say,” Oatha said when he’d finished. “I’m consternated about the future a our association.”

“And why’s that?” Joss took back the bottle and drank.

“You know I love you, so don’t go gettin your underpinnings in a big fuckin knot when I say this.”

“What, goddamn it?”

“You’re a little smoky. Men tend to buck out around you.”

Joss smiled, whiskey running down her chin.

“What you think, I’m gonna make you come, Oath?”

“It’s a reasonable concern, all things considered.”

“Only thing to get you kilt by me is tryin to get me unshucked and in the willows. I see the way you look at me sometimes.”

“Think I want up in the snatch of a mestiza?”

“Right. Was it a hard climb up to the pass?”

“Wasn’t no holiday.”

“Why the fuck didn’t we do this in the summertime?”

“ ’Cause you gonna be doin the strangulation jig down in Arizona. Go on, tell Lana to git.”

“Lana!” Joss yelled over the piano. Lana stopped playing, stared down at her lap. “Lana, honey, I want you to go on home for the day. We gonna be closin up early. You ain’t done nothin wrong. Your playin was real pretty.”

Lana got up from the piano bench, walked to the coatrack, and slipped into her wool-lined cape, pulling the hood over her head.

“Lana,” Joss said. The young woman stopped in the doorway, her back to the bar, head hung low. “You take care now, okay?”

Lana went outside. When the door closed, Joss pulled the bowie out of its sheath, set the knife on the bar.

She and Oatha looked over at the deputy, who was still snoring quietly.

“The key to your shackles is—”

“On that big metal ring on Al’s hip.”

Oatha tilted the bottle, took another long pull. Then he wiped his mouth, picked up the knife, scraped his thumb across the blade.

“I keep it sharp,” Joss warned.

Oatha sucked a whistle through his teeth and licked the blood from the shallow slice. “I’ll say.”

“How you gonna do it?”

“Slip it in between his slabs. Then twisty-twisty.”

Oatha moved soundlessly across the boards. He stopped at the potbellied stove, waited for a moment, letting his fingers warm, then stepped over to the deputy’s left side, positioning himself so he’d have the best angle for a downward thrust.

He opened the bearskin robe, exposing the man’s chest.

Al’s eyes flittered under his lids, and Oatha wondered from what dream he was about to awaken.

His grip tightened on the handle.

As he plunged the blade, he heard something outside, the knife point stopping three inches above the man’s heart.

Oatha glanced back at Joss. “The fuck is that?” he whispered.

He set the knife on the bar, walked to the door, cracked it open.

It was late afternoon, the sky clearing, and though the sun had already dipped below the canyon walls, he could see its long rays coppering the distant bladed rock at the pass, two miles south and two thousand feet above.

Stephen Cole tore down Main Street, hell for leather through waist-deep snow, his horse kicking up clouds of powder, and the Bible-puncher shouting as if the apocalypse were upon them, “They’re coming! They’re coming!”

43

Gloria wet the nib of her pen in the inkwell. She sat in a chair built of bent aspen branches and wrote by the light of a shadowgee made from an old can of Towle's Log Cabin Syrup, cut in half and poked full of holes. It hung from a rafter over the beautiful oak table Bart Packer had given them, the candle inside dispensing just enough light for her to write without straining her eyes.

When she'd finished, she blew the page dry and left the diary open on the table. Gloria walked to the bedroom doorway. She and Ezekiel had been lucky to find a cabin with a plank floor, and they'd spent a weekend last September laying straw and blue denim over the boards. It wasn't carpet, but it wasn't dirt, and you could walk over it in socks without freezing your toes.

Bessie and Harriet slept on the iron bedstead, and watching the mother and child hold each other under the quilt, Gloria felt a flare of envy. She looked at the mail-order rocking chair in the corner by the window, at Gus's crib, which Ezekiel had assembled out of packing crates, some of her dead son's clothes still laid out on the tiny mattress—a burlap sack stuffed with pine boughs.

The front porch creaked. *Zeke.* Someone banged on the door.

Gloria hurried back to the living room, grabbed the Schofield from the bookcase, where she'd left it sitting near a few dime novels.

"Mrs. Curtice! Y-you in there?" Gloria edged to the door. "Need to speak to you straight away!"

Her husband's words echoed in her head: Don't open it for nobody. Billy or Oatha or some rough-lookin feller come by, you know what to do.

The door shook.

Gloria put her hand on the latch, said, "What is it, Mr. McCabe?"

"I come for Bessie and Harriet. They in there with ye?"

Bessie emerged from the bedroom in her flour-sack underpinnings, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She mouthed "No."

"They aren't here, Mr.—"

"N-n-now I don't know if I believe that. How about you open this door and let me take a look for my own self?"

“Now isn’t the best time, Mr. McCabe. I’m sure you understand.”

“Naw, Mrs. Curtice. I don’t understand. But I’ll give you ten full seconds to open this door ’fore I tear it off the hinges.”

Bessie said, “We ain’t comin home with you, Billy.”

“Oh, y-y-y-you ain’t, huh? Why don’t you open this door so we can have a face-to-face conversation like adult human beins?”

Gloria said, “When Zeke gets home, we’ll all talk this out.”

“W-w-well, we might be waitin here quite a spell.”

Gloria lifted the latch, threw open the door. The barrel of the single-action revolver touched the end of Billy’s nose.

“You wanna elaborate on what the hell that meant?”

Billy smiled, his jagged teeth showing, but his eyes were skittish. His horse stamped in the snow. Even though his vaquero hat kept his face in shadow, Gloria could see that it was flecked with blood, and her heart fluttered.

“Why don’t you go on and, and, and, and put that away. You ain’t never shot nobody. You ain’t about to.”

“You don’t know anything about me. Get your hand away from that gun. Where’s my husband? He went up to the mine, lookin for you.”

“I guess he didn’t find me, did he?”

“You said, ‘We might be waitin here quite a spell.’ What’s that mean, you runt? Ain’t you man enough to stand by the words that come out of your mouth?”

“You do like I said and p-p-p-put that revolver away.”

Gloria thumbed back the hammer. Billy’s eyes widened.

“I don’t know what’s happened to you,” Bessie said. “Your mind ain’t right. You and Oatha kill those people like they say?”

“Now ain’t the time, Bess. Go on and get Harriet and come on.”

“Said I ain’t goin with you, Billy.”

His face went red and the corner of his mouth began to twitch. He turned as if to leave, then suddenly reached back and swiped the revolver out of Gloria’s hand, almost like an afterthought, and swung the walnut stock into her face.

Gloria sat down in the cabin doorway, dazed, her nose burning. When she looked up, Bessie was crying in the threshold of the bedroom, blocking her husband’s path to Harriet.

“Billy, just leave. Please. I’m scared a you and it—”

“Your hair’s fallin out ’cause I can’t put adequate food on our table. Know what that feels like for a man? They’s risks and they’s sacrifices in life, yeah? Well, I just made a few big ones, and now we’re set like you can’t even believe. That dream we talked about before I come out west? Remember? Well, it’s here. We got it for the takin. Tired a goin to bed hungry? A not bein able to afford cake soap? A wearin fuckin flour sacks for clothes? S-s-savin all year just to buy a doll for Harriet? You want a new dress? You can have twenty of ’em. It’ll take our baby girl all day to open her presents next Christmas. We’ll go somewhere warm and buy a big house and Abandon won’t seem like nothin but a bad dream. H-h-h-hell, we’ll go back to Tennessee if you want. Get your mother, your brothers out a them shacks. Maybe I can take care a Arnold. You think they don’t deserve that?”

Gloria struggled to her feet. She felt dizzy, her head swimming, blood and tears running down her chin, staining her white petticoat.

“What about Oatha?” Bessie asked. “I don’t like that bunko.”

“Fuck Oatha. We’ll get our share, leave that son of a bitch in Silverton, shove out on our own steam, just you, me, Harriet, and our life could be so good if you can find a way to forget a couple days a poor behavior. C-c-can you do that, Bess? Then it’s all yours. Everthin you ever wanted. We’ll be a well-heeled pair a bums on the plush. Straight goods.”

Gloria had begun to back quietly toward the kitchen. There was a knife inside the small wood box—a medicine chest filled with herbs and tinctures—sitting on one of the newspaper-lined shelves.

“Hey, Daddy,” Harriet said. The little girl had climbed out of bed and she stood behind her mother, clinging to Bessie’s legs.

“Hey there, darlin.”

As she reached the kitchen, a board squeaked beneath Gloria, and Billy spun, drew his big Walker. “You do me a great favor and set down by the fire, Mrs. Curtice.” Billy looked back at his wife. “You think I’m some monster, Bessie, but I ain’t. Just willin to do more for my family than most.”

“Billy, you say you done this for me, but look at my face. What kind a man beats on his—”

“Won’t ever lay a hand on you again. That’s a promise.”

“I need to know what all you done before I—”

“And I’ll tell you. Everthin. No more secrets. But right now, ’til we get out a this town, I need you to trust me. I love you and Harriet. You’re my blue chips. That’s the only reason I done any a this. Will you trust me?” Bessie looked over at Gloria. “Don’t look at her. Look in my eyes. This is *your* crossroads. What do *you* want?”

“To be with the boy I fell in love with in Tennessee.”

“You’re lookin at him.”

“Am I?”

“For a fact. Gonna be different after we leave. So much better.”

“I wanna believe that, Billy.”

Gloria said, “Bessie, you didn’t see what your husband did to—”

“Shut up!” Billy touched his wife’s face, and Gloria saw it happen—a softening in Bessie’s eyes, walls coming down.

“Burn the breeze back to the cabin,” Billy said. “I want you to pack what food we got, enough clothes for us to get to Silverton.”

“We’re goin now?”

“Can’t stay in this bog hole.”

“Bessie!” Gloria said. *“What are you doing?”*

Bessie reached down and took her daughter’s hand. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But he is my husband. I ain’t got nothin else.”

Gloria’s eyes ran over. “Where’s *my* husband? Where’s Zeke?”

The McCabes walked onto the front porch.

Billy said, “Y’all go on. I gotta talk to Mrs. Curtice alone.”

“About what?”

“Gonna trust me or not, Bess?” As Billy closed the door, Gloria stood up, the fire nothing more than a few orange coals.

“Is he dead? Will you tell me that before you shoot me down? Is that Zeke’s blood on your … Oh God!” She’d noticed his cowhide custom-mades. “You’re wearing his boots!”

“I can’t shoot ye, Mrs. Curtice.” Billy jammed the long barrel of the Walker down his pants and pulled a rusted buffalo skinner with a stag-horn grip from a sheath under his frock coat.

“Please,” she said as he came toward her.

“Got no choice here. You set still, and we’ll do this quick.”

The front door opened. Billy tucked his knife into his coat, looked back over his shoulder.

“I thought I told you—”

“Something’s happenin,” Bessie said. “Oscar and Randall are ridin around yellin for everyone to come outside.”

“What for?”

Gloria could hear the shouting now, saw two men on horseback loping up the path toward the cabin.

“Somethin about Indians. Come on, they’re callin for you, Billy. Want you to ride up to the pass with some a the other men, help head ’em off.”

2009

44

Abigail's watch showed 2:49 A.M. as the sprawling menace of Emerald House appeared through the falling snow. They'd killed their headlamps after leaving the switchbacks, and it had proved exceedingly difficult plowing their way through the basin in the total darkness of the storm. At the lake's edge, a hundred yards from the big Douglas fir trunks of the portico, they collapsed in the snow.

"I'm dying here, Lawrence."

"I know, me, too."

"I don't think I can walk much farther." Aside from her heart beating in her ears, the only other sounds were the lake lapping at the bank and the distant drone of wind tearing over the peaks. "I still think we should just hike back to camp, get my cell, try to—"

"I told you we won't get service in the canyon."

"But maybe up at the pass—"

"In this storm? Are you kidding?"

"Then let's just get the hell out of here, Lawrence. Go for help."

"It's twenty-seven miles back to civilization, and you just said you didn't know if you could walk any farther. In this weather, we wouldn't reach Silverton until Thursday morning at the earliest, and that would be hiking nonstop, hauling ass, assuming we didn't get lost or take a fall climbing down the icy south side of the Sawblade. Look, I brought the Tozers out here. Now that Emmett's dead, June's my responsibility, and I'm not leaving her in that mansion with Stu."

Oh, now you're responsible, when it might get us killed.

"Then what do you want to do?" she asked.

He struggled to his feet, reached down, helped his daughter up out of the snow.

"I want you to follow me and keep quiet."

They stole up to the west wing of Emerald House and Lawrence boosted Abigail into the same windowsill they'd attempted to escape through several hours earlier. Once inside, she watched her father hoist himself onto the sill, then gave him a hand stepping down into the kitchen on his sprained ankle.

Together, they slipped through the French doors and eased out into the corridor—just a gaping black hole that made Abigail temporarily forget the awful pain in her tailbone.

“I can’t see,” Lawrence whispered, “so just go slow, and make sure you don’t trip on anything. We make the slightest sound, it’s over.”

“Is the floor safe?”

“Nothing is.”

They proceeded with meticulous caution, testing the floorboards with every step to avoid a potentially fatal creak of weak wood.

The darkness never let up, and without the aid of headlamps, they had to trail their hands along the wall to ensure a straight trajectory down the corridor. Abigail followed a few feet behind her father, and she kept looking back over her shoulder, plagued by the unrelenting premonition that someone was creeping up behind them.

When Lawrence stopped, she said, “I don’t like this. I wanna get out of here right now.”

“Look.” Thirty feet ahead, a dim splotch of light shone onto the marble floor of the foyer. “It’s June,” he whispered.

In the vicinity of June’s headlamp, shapes began to materialize out of the darkness. Abigail could see Emmett’s widow sitting on the floor on the other side of the staircase, her back roped to a timber that had fallen out of the ceiling, her hands pinioned, shoulders heaving with grief.

Abigail spotted Emmett’s body, not ten feet away, at the base of the steps. It was impaled on a thick banister. She braced against the image, forced back the bile rising up her throat, made herself move on to the next moment. There was madness in the details, in the lingering.

Lawrence whispered, “Where’s Stu?”

Abigail shrugged, quietly unzipped her jacket, and pulled a wallet from an inner pocket. She fished out a dime, knelt down. The coin made a soft and delicate purr as it rolled across the marble, spinning out just a foot from June’s right leg.

The woman looked up, the bulb of her headlamp making it difficult for Lawrence and Abigail to see her.

“Hurry,” June whispered. “He’ll be back any minute.”

45

They crept across the icy marble of the foyer, and when they reached June, Lawrence withdrew Isaiah's sheathed dagger from his ski pants.

"You okay, sweetie?" Abigail whispered, her words reverberating through the foyer like prayers in a vast cathedral. It was hard to see June's face with any clarity in the sole, fading light of her headlamp.

"My left leg's cut pretty bad," June said, on the brink of tears. Abigail touched her shoulder as Lawrence sat down and began sawing the knife through the climbing rope that bound June to the rafter.

"How long's Stu been gone?" Abigail asked.

"About ten minutes."

"We didn't see any new tracks leaving the mansion."

"No, he's still inside. He heard something up on the third floor, went to check it out."

"What'd he hear?"

"Sounded like wood breaking from down here. It was loud. What happened to you guys?"

"Isaiah and Jerrod are dead," Abigail said. "It was … Look, I'll tell you that story later. Does Stu still have night-vision goggles and a gun?"

"Yes."

Lawrence unwound the climbing rope and tossed it aside. "Can you stand up and turn around for me? I'll cut these off." The blade sliced easily through the nylon restraints. "June, I think it'd be a good idea to switch off your headlamp."

The three stood close together in sheer darkness.

After a moment, June spoke, her voice breaking, "I keep looking over there at him. Keep thinking he'll get up, come over to me. Or that any second, I'll wake in our apartment, reach over in bed, feel the warmth of him in the dark. But he's cold now, isn't he? Do you think I could go over and sit with him? Would that be all—"

"You hear that?" Abigail said.

"What?" Lawrence asked.

"Listen." From some remote part of the mansion came a sound like a muted jackhammer, and it took Abigail only a moment to place it. "Stu's

firing his machine gun.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Lawrence said. “Scott’s back in town, dead. Isaiah and Jerrod are dead somewhere up near the pass. What the hell’s he shooting at?”

The machine gun went quiet. High above, in one of the upper corridors, came the thump of slow, heavy footsteps. Abigail peered up—they all did—but there was nothing to see in that expansive vacuum of light. She reached down, grabbed hold of June’s hand as the footsteps stopped.

No one whispered.

No one breathed.

Something crashed into the floor of the foyer, and Abigail and June nearly crushed each other’s hands.

They stood in stunned silence, no one daring to move.

Lawrence finally turned on his headlamp.

“Dear God,” June said. The light beam traced a widening lake of blood across the floor to its source—the destroyed head of Stu. He lay unnatural and broken on the section of marble exposed to the skylight, his face torqued away from them.

“You think Stu accidentally fell?” Abigail said. “Or jumped? Remember what Isaiah said about him? How he’d fallen apart since the war?”

“He drank half a bottle of vodka after you left,” June said.

Lawrence shook his head. “Look, his gun’s gone. Night goggles, too.”

“So maybe he left them on the third floor.”

Lawrence started toward the west wing.

“Wait!” Abigail whispered. She caught up with him. “You aren’t seriously going up there?”

46

Emmett’s plunge had effectively destroyed the central staircase, so Lawrence and Abigail worked their way back toward the kitchen to the west-wing stairwell.

They climbed to the third floor and stood for a second time in that bullet-shredded corridor, Abigail feeling trapped in some kind of repetitive fever dream, coming back again and again to this nightmare world.

Their headlamps passed over the doors, the wood-paneled walls, the mounds of snow where the ceiling had failed.

Lawrence limped a few steps into the corridor, stood there listening.

They proceeded on, over the pockmarked wood where Isaiah had fired up at them through the ceiling, skirting that hole where Abigail had punched through and nearly fallen to her death.

They reached what was left of the central staircase.

“I don’t hear a thing,” Abigail whispered.

“Me, neither. Look at that.” He pointed to where several dozen brass shell casings had rolled against the wall. “What was he shooting at?”

They walked on, their headlamps aimed toward the end of the east-wing corridor, an occasional snowflake drifting down through the ceiling, a speck of bright white in their light beams.

“Maybe he did jump,” Lawrence whispered. “Got fueled up on vodka and freaked out when he heard something. Emerald House shifts constantly. It’s full of noises. Or it could’ve just been an animal. Another coyote.”

“Should we go back, then?” Abigail said.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good—” Lawrence took a sharp breath.

“What?” Abigail whispered. “You’re scaring me, Lawrence.”

“Something just stepped out from one of the rooms at the end of the corridor.”

She clutched her father’s arm. “Where’d it go?”

“Toward the sitting room, I think. It was just a shadow, and it moved so fast.”

“Okay, let’s not do this, all right? This is stupid. Like in horror movies when people walk into haunted houses by themselves for no good reason. I wanna go—”

“This isn’t like that, Abby. Come on. We have to see.”

“No.”

“Then go back down to the foyer and wait with June, but I’m not leaving until I—”

She tightened her grip on his arm, said, “I’m not going anywhere in this place alone.”

“Then I guess you’re coming with me.”

Lawrence continued slowly down the corridor, Abigail clinging to her father like she was eight years old again.

They came at last to a decimated sitting area at the corridor’s end, heard nothing but the wind moaning outside in low, dissonant tones like some demonic choir. Snow billowed in through the window frames, having already buried the bookshelves and even drifted into the fireplace.

As Abigail swept her headlamp over the ravaged furniture, the listing chandelier began to tinkle.

Lawrence was already turning to go back, but before following him, she shone her headlamp into the far left corner.

“Jesus Christ!”

“What?”

“Lawrence!”

A man crouched behind a rat-eaten divan, his knees drawn into his chest, rocking slowly back and forth and shivering with cold.

“*Are you with them?*” he whispered, and Abigail felt so completely paralyzed that her knees gave out and she sank onto the floor, trembling with pure fear, adrenaline raging, heart red-lining, even before she saw Stu’s machine gun in his hand.

1893

47

Molly Madsen sat in the bay window, eating the wedge of chocolate cake from the Curtices' Christmas basket and looking down at the commotion on Main Street. It had been years since she'd seen this many people out on the town at once—entire families webbing north through deep snow, many still buttoning their slickers and coats and pulling on their mittens, a ubiquitous look of fear and confusion on all the faces.

Molly heard footsteps out in the hallway, followed by a soft knock. She rose from the divan, crossed the room barefooted, and opened the door. A young blond woman stood in the hallway, enveloped in a white woolen cape.

"May I help you?" Molly asked.

• • •

Lana noticed that under the sheer bed linen, draped like a shawl over her shoulders, Molly was naked.

On many occasions, Lana had glimpsed her sitting in the bay window from the street below and thought her pretty. In proximity, Molly Madsen looked hard-wintered, pupils dilated from laudanum. Her five-year self-imposed confinement to room 6 had turned her skin the sun-deficient gray of a dead tooth, and though her pitch-black hair dropped to her waist, you could see her scalp on top, where her hair had thinned and become laced with silver. Seam squirrels—lice—crawled under the hair on her arms.

The room reeked worse than a bunkhouse—spoiled food, oranges, a hint of old perfume.

"You're the piano player," Molly said, and when she smiled, Lana saw her lips smeared with chocolate icing and bits of cake stuck between her rotting teeth. "Jack and I have so enjoyed sitting in the window, listening. The music carries quite well. It's a sure cure for putting me to sleep. Was that Beethoven you were playing this afternoon?"

Lana reached into her cape, pulled out a pencil. She stared at the tan-colored wood of the door frame, trying to conjure words that had for so long existed only in the safety of thought. She couldn't remember the last time she'd written anything, but it was easier to recall the letters than to

amass the nerve to create them, with no words spoken, no direct communication with another human being in three years, since that Christmas night in Santa Fe.

Molly said, “Can’t you talk?” Lana looked up, forced herself to make eye contact. Her gloved hands trembled as she pressed the pencil tip into the wood.

When she’d finished, Molly scanned the tiny writing on the door frame, said, “It’s Engler. *Mrs.* Jack Engler. Why on earth would I come with you?”

Lana scrawled an answer, overwhelmingly strange to converse with another person, even like this. The piano had been her larynx for so long.

Something awful happening.

Molly read it, said, “Well, I can’t leave yet. Jack should be here any moment, and what would he do if I was gone when he returned? I have to be here to greet him. Do you understand?”

A draft wafted through the hallway, blew open Molly’s shawl, her nipples erect in the chill.

Lana wrote: *Leave note.*

“What if he didn’t find it? He’d be distressed if I wasn’t here. Jack’s very protective. No, I think I’ll wait in our suite. But thank you for the invitation. We’ll come along when he arrives. Where is this ball being held?”

Lana shook her head, eyes welling up with tears.

“You know, I have the perfect dress for it. A rose-colored evening gown. Jack first saw me in it in San Francisco, knew instantly he had to have me. Would you care to see an albumen print of my husband? You’ve never seen a more handsome man, I assure—”

Lana tried to grab her arm to pull her out into the hall, but Molly withdrew into her suite and slammed the door.

48

Lana refastened her webs in the lobby of the deserted hotel and went outside. The sky was a rusty red, the walls of the box canyon slathered in alpenglow.

Sounds of men shouting resounded through Abandon.

She waded out into the middle of the street, where a path had been beaten down in the snow, fell in behind a young family of four, followed them down Main, listening to the children complain of the cold, begging to go home so they could finish supper and play with their Christmas toys.

Glancing up a side street, Lana saw more people streaming out of the cabins, and someone yelled, *"Hostiles?"*

They passed the burned-out buildings on the north end of town, torched over a year ago in an autumn fire. The family ahead of her stopped. The father knelt down, drew his children into his arms.

"Why you cryin, Pa?"

"Ain't." But he wiped his eyes. "Gotta leave y'all for a spell."

"Where you goin?"

"Me and some a the other pas are gonna ride up toward the pass and stop what's comin, make sure don't nothin happen to this town and all the mas and children in it. But I'll be back 'fore you know it. Need you to listen to your ma for me."

"Yes, Pa."

"Yes, Pa."

He stood and embraced his wife, and as Lana bypassed them in the deeper snow, she heard the woman say, "I'm scared, John."

"Don't be, love. Just pray."

The web tracks branched off from Main and went up the hillside. Lana passed smoking cabins on the spruce-dotted slope, saw two Italians on horseback rousing families from their Christmas suppers, hollering for them to get dressed quick and head up to the chapel.

The church stood in the distance, one of the first buildings erected in Abandon, though after a decade of scant upkeep, it needed whitewashing, and the windows on the north side had been boarded up since a blizzard had blown them out in the winter of 1890.

A crowd was gathering on the steps, and as Lana looked up at the wood cross, black against the copper sky, it began to teeter and she startled, thought for half a second the world was ending.

Then the iron bell began to clang, faster and faster, and she saw the preacher, Stephen Cole, pulling the tolling rope, not with the leisurely announcement of a wedding or a Sunday service, but with all the ominous urgency of a warning, so hard that it shook the belfry and made the cross stand crooked.

2009

49

He reached into his parka, pulled out a lighter and a pack of Kools.

“You wanna smoke?”

“That that menthol shit?”

“Of course.”

“What the hell.”

Isaiah slipped two cigarettes between his lips, lit them both, handed one to Jerrod.

“Ain’t this some shit.”

They sat perched on a four-foot ledge, midway down the icy head wall.

“You got the first-aid kit in your pack?” Jerrod asked, his voice straining with pain.

“Nah, it’s in one of the duffel bags back at the mansion.”

“Fuck.”

“Hurts bad, huh?”

“Holy shit, man. A little morphine would really hit the spot.”

“It looks bad.”

“I haven’t looked.”

“No? You can see the bone—”

“Shut the fuck up. I don’t wanna hear that.”

It was snowing so hard, Isaiah had to cup the end of his cigarette to keep the ember dry. Jerrod took an aggressive drag, leaned back against the rock he’d slammed into feetfirst on his fall down the mountain. Both legs were stretched out, but the right one had rotated almost ninety degrees, so at a passing glance he appeared to own a pair of left legs.

“You think Lawrence is lying?” Jerrod asked.

“Did at first. Now I’m not so sure. I think he may be just as pissed as we are.”

“So no gold.”

“Nada.”

“Fuck, this hurts, man. Talk to me. I gotta keep my mind off it. What were you gonna do, say we actually found it, managed to get the gold out of these mountains?”

“So, say it turned out to be twenty-four mil, right? That’s eight apiece. Well, first off, I’m in debt over two hundred thousand. I was gonna pay that shit off, put enough aside to send the kids through school, set me and Shari up so we didn’t have to work. Then after that, say I got four mil left to play around with. We were gonna build this tight palace, man. In one of those upper-class all-black suburbs of Atlanta. We’d already sketched a design. Shit. Home theater. Exercise room. Huge master bedroom. Twelve-foot ceilings. Big pool. Jacuzzi. Basketball court. Giant grill out back. Kind of place my kids would wanna come back to after they were grown and gone. Christmas or Thanksgiving, it’d be me and Shari, our three kids, about a hundred grandbabies running around. I’d have liked that.”

“Shari knows what you’re doing out here?”

“Me and Shari, we synced, man. No secrets. That’s the only way. She’s my partner in all things. So how ’bout you? Any big plans for your share?”

Jerrod tossed his cigarette over the ledge and groaned.

“Come on, baby, you gotta keep talking. Chase that pain away. You seen worse.”

“No, actually, we have a winner.” Jerrod closed his eyes, tucked his gloved hands into his armpits, shivering violently. “I didn’t even need eight million,” he said.

“You’d have stayed in Colorado?”

“No, I was gonna head up to Alaska. Last frontier, right? Find some land out in the middle of bumfuck. Where there wasn’t even a road in.”

“You Daniel Boone motherfucker, you.”

“Maybe in the Chigmits, the Aleutians. Put a cabin on a big lake. Always wanted to get my pilot’s license. I’d buy a little floatplane, and the only time I’d ever leave would be to go for supplies. Just live out there and fish and hunt. Forget about all the shit I’ve seen.”

“I hear that.”

“Nobody’d ever see my ass again.” Jerrod gritted his teeth. “I never been so cold, man.”

“Think Stu would’ve got his shit together with his share?”

“I think he’d have just drunk himself to death faster, and with better booze. Damn, man, this is getting worse and worse.”

Isaiah flicked his cigarette away. He stood up, peered over the ledge, staring down into roiling snow and bottomless dark.

“How’s it look?” Jerrod asked.

“Steep as shit. Can’t even tell how much farther down it goes.”

“We got a situation here.”

“That we do, brother.”

“You aren’t hurt bad, are you?”

“Just my head and my pride, but they hurt like a motherfucker.”

“You foresee any way of getting me out of here?”

Isaiah sat down, put his hand on Jerrod’s shoulder, shook his head.

Jerrod nodded. “Afraid you might say that.”

“Just don’t know how we’d explain our way out of this one, partner.”

“I’m sorry. I fucked that jump up.” Jerrod wiped his eyes.

“You ain’t gotta apologize for shit.” A catch in Isaiah’s voice, too.

Jerrod said, “Look, if it’s gotta be this way, I can’t just sit up here by myself, wait to freeze to death. Not in this kind of pain. You know what I’m saying?”

“I feel you.”

“There’s no other way? You sure?”

“I don’t see it.” Isaiah pursed his lips together and cocked his head, his brow furrowing up as his eyes welled. “Serving with you, man,” he said.

“I know. I know. Same here. Let’s just get this the fuck over with, huh?”

Isaiah took up his machine pistol and racked the slide. His eyes burned. He couldn’t see, had to wait a moment, letting them clear, not wanting to fuck any part of this up.

“You wanna pray or something, Jerrod?”

“Wouldn’t know what the fuck to say. Haven’t prayed a day out of my whole life. God ain’t a fool if He’s up there, and I don’t wanna insult the Man, particularly now.”

“Anything you want me to take care of when I get out of here? Anybody you want me to go see, let ’em know, give ’em a message or—”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. Your parents.” He smiled. “Your harem of bitches.”

“Nah. Nobody’ll notice.”

“You ready, then?”

Jerrod drew in a deep breath, looked all around at the rock, the snow, the darkness, the cliffs, taking heed of this cold ledge where he was going to die. “Yeah.”

“Love you, brother. Never said that to a—”

“You, too, man. You, too. Family, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the suspense is killing me, so …” Jerrod turned away. He stared at the tip of his boot, thought how pretty the snow was falling on it, and what a strange last thought this was.

Isaiah raised the machine pistol, positioned the barrel a few inches from the back of Jerrod’s head. He calmed himself, held the red dot steady.

Jerrod slumped over into the snow.

Isaiah fired another Kool, sat for a while, smoking, listening to the wind, watching snow pile up on the rock, on Jerrod. For the moment, it melted on his friend’s warm face.

At length, Isaiah stood up. But he felt empty, something unfinished. He had a notepad in his backpack, and he pulled it out and found a pencil, sat hunched over the paper, shielding it from the snow. He scribbled down five words, tore out the sheet of paper, and slipped it into the pocket of Jerrod’s parka.

Isaiah gathered up his things, then followed the ledge for thirty feet until it slimmed out into nothing. As he began the slow and treacherous descent into the canyon, he kept thinking of what he’d written for his friend, wished it could have been more, repeating Jerrod’s epitaph in his head like a plainsong.

This man was a soldier.

This man was a soldier.

50

The man behind the divan stood up, the machine pistol quivering in his grasp.

There was a flash, Abigail thinking he'd pulled the trigger, the walls of the sitting area lighting up, the snow glinting. It went dark again. Muffled thunder rolled through the basin, shook the chandelier, the weakened floor trembling beneath her feet.

Abigail rose up slowly, her arms outstretched in deference to the weapon. When the lightning came again, she noticed the streaks of blood down the man's face, his eyes rimmed with black bruises.

"*Are you with them?"* he whispered again.

"With who?" Abigail asked.

"The men in masks. There were—Get back!" he yelled and Abigail saw the machine pistol shift to her father.

Lawrence said, "You see my hands, right? I promise you we aren't a threat. In fact, we're probably in the same—"

"I'll decide that." His eyes returned to Abigail. "What are you doing here?"

"We arrived in Abandon this afternoon, a team of six. Downstairs in the foyer is the third remaining member of our party. Tonight, while we were exploring the town, those men in masks took us hostage. They killed our guide and a man named Emmett."

"Tell me the names of the men who attacked you."

Abigail had to think for a moment, her mind edging into overdrive. "Isaiah. Stu … and Jerrod. Jerrod was also one of our guides on the hike in. But they're dead now."

"All?"

"Yes."

"How'd the other two die?"

"Isaiah and Jerrod fell off a cliff near the pass a couple hours ago."

"What were you doing up there in this storm?"

Abigail hesitated only a second or two. "Looking for these gold bars. Did you kill Stu?"

The man nodded slowly.

“What happened to you?” Abigail said. “Your face—”

“Is it bad?”

“Yeah.”

“You two look pretty banged up yourselves.”

The man lowered the machine pistol. He stepped out from behind the divan, walked into the beam of her headlamp, tall and very thin, though even through the bruises, he had gentle eyes, which Abigail instinctively trusted. His silver-and-black down coat appeared to have been ripped through the middle by a knife swipe, and his stringy brown hair lay pasted with sweat to the sides of his face.

“I’m Quinn,” he said.

“Abigail.” Though it was difficult to tell with all the bruising, she placed his age around forty.

Her father stepped forward. “Lawrence.”

“Lawrence *Kendall*?”

“Have we met?”

Quinn smiled. “No, but I’m an admirer of your work.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been in the history department at the U of A, Tucson, the last seven years. This ghost town’s been my passion for a long time.”

“Thought I was the only one. What’s your last name?”

“Collins.”

“Haven’t heard of you.”

“I’ve only published in my field, Colonial America and the Revolutionary War. Abandon’s more like a hobby, I guess.”

“Last great mystery of the West.”

“Absolutely. But I just got tenure this year, so I’m hoping to get funding and support for a semester of real study. Maybe even a grant to come here for a summer.”

“Good luck getting a permit for that.”

“Yeah, my attitude’s been, Fuck the Forest Service. I’ve been coming up from Arizona every year to spend time in this canyon, do a little elk hunting on the side. But it’s a real thrill to meet you, Lawrence.” Quinn reached out to shake his hand. “I’ve read everything you’ve written on Abandon.”

51

They came upon June at the base of the steps. She was standing by her husband, one hand on the banister that had run through him, the other caressing his shaved head.

“Just us, June,” Abigail said.

She glanced up at them, void of expression, catatonic.

“Who’s that with you?” she asked.

“This is Quinn. He was being held here by Isaiah and Stu.”

Quinn froze when he saw Emmett, brought his hand to his mouth, whispered, “Oh God. June, is it? I’m so sorry. Is there anything—”

“No, there isn’t. I just need to be alone with him.”

Abigail touched her arm, said, “Maybe you should—”

“No! Go!”

They left June with her husband and sat down nearby on the cascading staircase that flowed toward the large oak doors.

Abigail pulled three water bottles out of Lawrence’s pack and rolled two of them across the floor to Quinn.

“Thank you.” Quinn unscrewed the cap and ravenously downed the entire twelve ounces in one long gulp. Then he leaned back against the steps and gingerly ran his fingers across his face as if reading Braille, trying to picture how the damage had distorted it.

“Isaiah did that?” Abigail asked.

“Quite a violent streak in that man.”

“So what, exactly, happened to you?”

Quinn opened the second bottle of water and took another long drink. “I arrived in Abandon last Wednesday morning. Wednesday night, very late, I woke to the sound of footsteps near my tent. Frightened me pretty bad. I called out, asked who was there. No one answered. Of course, I couldn’t go back to sleep, so I unzipped the tent and crawled outside. There were two men in masks with guns standing there.”

He shivered, as if just speaking about it rekindled the fear. “Isaiah and Stu brought me to this mansion. They kept demanding that I show them where ‘it’ was. I told them I had no idea what they were talking about. They said I was lying. They beat me. Tied me up and left me in one of the rooms

on the third floor. Several times a day, they'd come back, ask if I wanted to tell them or if I needed another beating. I would always say the same thing: I didn't know what it was they wanted.

"Tonight, after working me over for a while, they blindfolded me and slapped a piece of tape on my mouth. Few hours later, I heard a ruckus on the floor below and voices I hadn't heard before. Suppose that was you guys. I managed to find an edge on the old chair they'd strapped me to, finally cut through the tape around my wrists about an hour ago."

"You made all that racket up there that caught Stu's attention?" Abigail asked.

"Yeah. I'd crept downstairs, seen there was only one of them guarding June, and I knew it was my only chance. When Stu came up, he was drunk, and I managed to overpower him."

Quinn sipped his water. Outside, the wind still made that strange unnerving sound like ghosts humming.

"So why'd you come to Abandon in the first place?" Lawrence asked.

Quinn smiled. "Well, why are you here?"

Abigail sensed something in the current between the two men.

Lawrence said, "I was giving June and her husband a tour of the ghost town. They're paranormal photographers."

"That's all, huh?"

Abigail realized what it was: distrust. These two historians sizing each other up, attempting to gauge how much the other one knew, what to let on, what to keep to themselves.

"What was it again that you were looking for up at the pass? I think I heard Abigail say something about—"

"All right, should we quit jerking each other off here?" Lawrence said. "Anyone who's studied Abandon in depth knows that a sizable quantity of Packer's gold has never been accounted for."

"And you've been searching for it."

It got quiet for a moment. Then Lawrence said, "Yeah. And you?"

Quinn nodded. "You an honest man, Lawrence?"

"Guess that depends."

"What if I were to tell you that I have something in my jacket that might be able to help us out?"

"I'd be interested."

“Interested enough for full disclosure?”

“Assuming it cuts both ways.”

Quinn reached into his pocket, handed Lawrence a rusted key attached to a nylon rope.

“Where’d you get this?” Lawrence asked.

“Full disclosure?”

“Yeah.”

“From an old man on his deathbed.”

“What’s it open?” Abigail asked.

“I’ve spent the last ten autumns of my life trying to find an answer to that.

I know it doesn’t open anything in this crumbling mansion or the ghost town or the mill.”

Lawrence got up, limped over to the entrance of Emerald House, threw the doors open, stood watching the snow.

Abigail called out, “You all right?”

After a moment, he returned, stared down at them, and Abigail could hear the change in his voice as soon as he opened his mouth.

“There’s almost two feet of snow on the ground,” he said. “I know it’s late, and we’re all past the point of exhaustion, but with the snow dumping like this, an avalanche would make it impossible to find. We’d have to wait until next summer, when the snows broke. Besides, it’s not safe to be in Emerald House with all this snow piling up on the roof.”

Quinn stood up, said, “I don’t understand. What are you getting at?”

“I might know what your key opens.”

1893

52

Under calmer circumstances, Gloria might have noticed the sky—clouds striated with a thousand tones of orange, like you were staring up into the guts of an overripe peach, and some of them still bleeding pink curtains of snow.

But she couldn't see anything through the window of tears.

Someone yelled her name.

Gloria stopped, turned back, looking downslope at the chapel far below, the clang of its bell echoing through the canyon.

The last of Abandon's residents trudged up the web trail, the closest of them Emma Ilg, wrapped in a black manta, her purple gown bulging out of the bottom, encrusted with ice. Emma stopped below Gloria and hunched over to catch her breath in the thin air.

When she looked up, she said, "Have you seen Russ—What's wrong?"

Gloria shook her head, tears streaming.

"Billy McCabe and Oatha Wallace … know 'em?"

"Know of them. Why?"

Gloria went to pieces. "I think they killed our husbands."

Emma's ruddy face turned cold, rigid. "No. Don't you say that to me. Russ and Ezekiel are up ahead. They're trying to find us—"

"Listen to me, Emma."

"I will not hear—"

"Billy and Oatha murdered Mr. Packer last night and made off with his gold. That's why our husbands rode up to the pass. But it's been four hours and Zeke hasn't come back to me."

"How do you know they're gone?"

" 'Cause Billy came to my cabin and was on the verge of killin me before —"

"You've seen them dead?"

"No."

"Then they aren't. My husband's up ahead."

"Please, Emma—"

"Don't speak another word to me!" Emma pushed her way up the trail, knocking Gloria down into the snow as she passed.

A ways up the mountain, a woman screamed.

• • •

"Al, get your fuckin hands off me," Joss said.

"Come on, they's children up ahead a you. Watch that mouth—"

"Don't tell me how to be. You got these wrist irons too tight. They're strangulatin my hands. And I need a brain tablet."

"I'll fix 'em when we get there *and* get you a smoke. Simmer down." Joss glanced up toward the end of the canyon. With the storm having passed, she could finally see the steep white slope two miles south that led up to the Sawblade. She squinted her eyes, trying to raise the black specks zigzagging down like a line of warrior ants, thought she'd rather go it alone, take her chances in Abandon, than holed up with this miserable bunch of pilgrims.

Near the rimrock, the trail had become an icy staircase, stomped down and smoothed over by the passage of a hundred pairs of webs.

"How you expect me to climb with no hands?"

"Haul in your neck. I'm helpin you, ain't I?"

Joss purposely tripped, and Al had to grab her under both elbows to keep her from sliding down the mountain.

"We're almost there," he said. "Can you climb ten more steps?"

As Joss struggled to her feet, her fingers grazed over the bowie knife jammed down into her canvas trousers, and she thought, *It will be such a pleasure to stick this in you, you stackwad cocksucker.*

Fifty feet back down the trail, Joss heard a woman scream.

• • •

"Where's Daddy?"

"He rode up to the pass with Mr. Wallace, honey."

"What for?"

"Don't you worry about that."

Bessie walked ahead of her daughter as they climbed the slope above town, her mind running in ten directions at once. The gold. The murders. Heathens riding down from the pass. They'd been delayed in getting to the chapel, because Billy had told them to go home first and pack for the trip to Silverton. But she was with him now, and despite everything, it felt right.

He was her husband, after all. The Good Lord commanded that she obey him.

The trail steepened, and just ahead lay a series of icy steps that climbed the remaining distance up the cuesta to the rimrock.

“All right, Har, I need to hold your hand on this part.” Bessie turned around. “Harriet!” she screamed. “Harriet!” She couldn’t see anything downslope, standing high enough above town that a slice of the sun still lingered over the far side of the canyon.

“What’s wrong, ma’am?” An Englishman leading his wife and two daughters stopped on the trail just below.

“You seen my daughter? She’s yea high. Six years old. Curly black hair. She was right here with me not a second ago.”

“No, I sure haven’t seen—”

“Oh Jesus. Excuse me.” Bessie tried to scoot by, but the big bearded Englishman stretched his arm out to stop her.

“Ma’am, now you gotta keep climbing. We’re in terrible—”

“I’ve lost my daughter!”

“And someone’s gonna find her and they’ll bring her along.”

“Sir, please step out of my way.”

“You’re holding up the line.”

“Harriet! Harriet!”

As Bessie tried once more to step around him, he scooped her up, threw her over his shoulder, and continued up the steps toward the rimrock, Bessie flailing and screaming, the Englishman shushing her.

“We’re gonna get everyone safely inside, and if she isn’t there, I’ll go find her myself. That’s a promise.”

But Bessie’s desperate screaming drowned him out. She even surpassed the church bell until the mountain swallowed her.

2009

53

June whimpered, “I should’ve stayed with Emmett. He’s all alone in that place.”

Abigail walked with her arm around June, supporting her, and within earshot of the two professors. “I know,” she said, “but we can’t split up, and with the snow coming down like this, the roof of Emerald House could collapse.”

They made a careful descent out of Emerald Basin, down the steep switchbacks to the canyon floor, Lawrence and Quinn talking shop while they fought their way through the snow.

Even though her tailbone was in agony, Abigail felt revived by a second wind as they passed their buried tents, the llamas standing together in a mass of fur and breath clouds. It was almost four in the morning when they entered the ghost town of Abandon, a pride of headlamps moving between the dark and snow-fraught buildings—some swaying in the wind, on the brink of collapse.

She caught a fragment of what Lawrence was saying: “… tempting, but my first priority is getting June and my daughter out of here.”

As they approached the north end of Abandon, Abigail improved her pace, came up between the professors, said, “So where are you taking us, Lawrence?”

He glanced back. “Not much farther now. All will be revealed.”

At the end of town, Lawrence turned and led them up the east side of the canyon. After a hundred yards, Abigail’s headlamp shone on something through the heavy snow—that ruined church in the spruce, its iron bell capped with snow, its cross powder-blown and listing in the wind.

They hiked on, the snow rising almost to her knees. Soon they were climbing again, Abigail using her hands and feet now, the slope so steep that she had to kick her boots in to avoid slipping. At the moment she didn’t think she could climb anymore, Lawrence reached back and pulled her and June up onto a wide ledge.

They’d arrived at the base of the rimrock. From here, the canyon wall rose vertically into darkness, and Abigail was on the verge of asking where they could possibly go from here when she saw it—behind Quinn, an

opening to a mine shaft, seven feet high and wide enough for several to walk abreast into the mountain.

“How have I never seen this?” Quinn said.

Lawrence pointed to the rock around the opening. “Because of the way the rock overhangs, you can’t see the shadow of the tunnel from the canyon floor. You’d have to stumble upon it by sheer dumb luck, like I did last year.”

He turned and walked into the mine.

“Warmer in here,” Quinn said.

“Most of the mines around Abandon stay a balmy thirty-seven degrees Fahrenheit year round. Refreshing in the summer.”

Abigail and June followed them in.

The wind died away.

“How’s your ankle holding up, Lawrence?” Abigail asked.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m on pure adrenaline now.”

Water dripped from the ceiling onto the hood of Abigail’s jacket.

The air smelled dank, of water and minerals.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“They used to call it a ‘shoofly,’ ” Lawrence said, his voice echoing off the rock and trailing away deep into the mountain. “It’s just an entryway into the mine.”

She shined her headlamp into the distance, where the tunnel seemed to narrow, and thirty feet ahead, Abigail saw their headlamp beams converge upon a small iron door.

1893

54

Shadowgees had been placed every twenty feet on the wet, rocky floor, like luminarias for a subterranean party. Gloria hurried along the downward-sloping tunnel into the mountain, following the echo of voices in the darkness ahead.

The day hole narrowed, and she came at last to a small iron door built into the rock. A man she recognized as the Godsend's assayer manned the entrance, and he offered his hand, escorting her through.

"You can head on over that way with the others, ma'am, and do watch your step on this uneven rock."

Lanterns and candles and more shadowgees illuminated the rock in firelight, and as she passed into the main chamber, the whole of Abandon overwhelmed her in a hundred-strong chorus of weeping and shouting and voices in varying strains of panic—bawling, terrified children; mothers and fathers trying to comfort them, many failing to hold back their own tears; a handful of men barking orders, attempting to manage the chaos; huddles of roostered miners, cursing whatever breed of heathen dare descend into their canyon and making pronouncements of war and grandiose predictions of the hell they would unleash on any savage who breeched the iron door; and Emma Ilg, flitting from person to person, a manic fly, asking if they'd seen her husband.

Gloria found a spot along the wall between two distraught families, crumpled down on the cold rock, and buried her face in the sleeves of her woolen jacket. *Heathens are coming and Zeke is gone.* She kept repeating it to herself, as if verifying that the nightmare was real, crying harder and harder as the pandemonium lifted to a crescendo.

Someone touched her shoulder. She looked up, and for a split second, out of sheer will and hope, she thought she saw Ezekiel squatted down in front of her, and her heart ruptured for him.

But it was the shunned madam she'd met last night at the dance hall, a thousand years ago, shivering under her bright red capote, her burgundy curls dusted with snow.

"It's Rosalyn," the old whore said. "What's wrong, honey? Where's your husband? He ride up to the pass with the other men?"

Gloria shook her head, but when she tried to tell her about Zeke, the words froze in her throat. Rosalyn sat beside her, reached over, and pulled Gloria's head down into her lap. She pushed back the hood of Gloria's cape and ran her fingers through her blond hair.

A voice rose above the din. Children stopped crying. The rowdy miners hushed. Gloria lifted her head from Rosalyn's lap, saw all eyes on Bessie McCabe, who was standing amid the crowd, ripping out clumps of hair, and screaming Harriet's name, her voice filling the cavern, reverberating down the tunnels, firelit tears glistening on her bruised face.

Stephen Cole rushed through the iron door toward Bessie. He embraced her and they sank down together on the floor, the preacher cradling her in his arms like a baby, rocking with her, whispering, "Calm down, my child, calm down. We'll find her."

• • •

Joss spotted Lana Hartman across the cavern, sitting quietly against the wall, her eyes shut tight, lips moving as if in prayer.

"Al, I told you I gotta see a man about a horse."

They stood twenty feet from the iron door, and even in the weak, shadow-ridden light, Joss saw the boy's pale complexion flush.

"Can't you hold it a little while longer?" he whispered.

"Let me go on down that tunnel there, have my piece a privacy."

"You know I can't let you out a my sight."

"You promised you'd loosen these wrist irons," she whined.

"Hell, Joss. Hell." The young deputy reached into his slicker, worked the key off the big ring attached to one of the belt loops on his dungarees, and waved it in Joss's face. "Zeke Curtice'll put me in the boneyard if I let you run a blazer on—"

"Al." Joss smiled, watched how easily the boy's face disarmed, knew for a fact he'd take full advantage if he ever got the chance. "You're too close to the belly. Watch me squat if you want."

"Might have to, Joss," he said, then sighed. "Turn around."

Al lifted her black serape and unlocked the wrist irons.

"Bring a happy jack," she said, and Al picked one of the shadowgees off the floor and followed his prisoner into the empty passage.

2009

55

As Lawrence rapped his knuckles on the iron, Abigail's headlamp shone on the surface of a door so overrun with rust, it resembled brown mold. It stood closed and locked by means of a thick crossbar held in place with a padlock the size of a small shield.

Quinn reached into his down jacket and pulled out the key.

"Full disclosure, Lawrence. How'd you find this place?"

"On my final day last fall, I climbed up the east side of the canyon to take a picture of the ghost town from above, and happened to stumble upon this mine. You have to understand—at the time, I was so absorbed in my search for Oatha and Billy's claim hole that I didn't think twice about this shaft. Besides, there are countless mines above Abandon. Figured it wasn't anything special. But if you found that key in Bart's suite, *and* it fits that lock … Shit, my heart must be going a hundred miles an hour."

"I know, mine, too." Quinn held up the key. "Shall I?"

"Absolutely."

Quinn slipped the key into the hole.

"Is it working?"

"Don't know yet. The mechanism feels pretty stiff, so I'm going slow. Don't wanna break it off." Quinn carefully turned the key. "I think it's working." He slid the padlock out of the crossbar and set it down. "Jeez, that's heavy. Help me with this, Lawrence." The two men lifted the crossbar out of the deep iron brackets and dropped it on the rock.

With the crossbar gone, the door was naked save for a small lever on the right side near the rock, which appeared to function as a doorknob.

Lawrence lifted the lever.

From inside came the rusted squeak of a bolt moving.

The door swung inward and clanged against the rock, a strong, cold draft sweeping in, the mountain sucking air deep into itself, as if trying to breathe.

"Unbelievable," Lawrence whispered as Abigail felt June's grasp tighten around her hand.

"Lawrence, when did you first come to Abandon?" Quinn asked.

"Nineteen seventy-nine."

“You’ve got me beat. Do the honors.”

Lawrence crossed the threshold, Quinn following close behind. As she entered, Abigail moved her headlamp along the walls, saw a grouping of holes in a sweep of unblasted rock, the product of a day spent double-jacking more than a hundred years ago.

She heard Lawrence gasp, and she broke away from June and went to her father’s side. “What’s wrong?” His headlamp was trained on an alcove fifteen feet off to the right of the iron door, his dimming light illuminating a collection of tattered burlap sacks, ten in all. Lawrence unclipped his backpack, took a deep, trembling breath, then limped into the alcove and knelt on the rocky floor. He reached into one of the sacks. His head dropped.

“What?” Quinn said. “They empty?”

Lawrence chucked something through the darkness.

A brick of solid gold thudded on the rock at Abigail’s feet. Then another. And another. She reached down, picked one up. The bar looked small in her hand, but it felt disproportionately heavy for its size, the yellow metal gleaming under her lamp, its surface marred with chinks and divots, cold as a block of ice.

“You’re holding more than two hundred and eighty thousand dollars right there,” Quinn said.

Lawrence wept.

Abigail went to him in the alcove, asked, “What is it?”

He shook his head. “Waited a long time for this.”

Quinn had been rifling through the sacks. “I count sixty-one bricks,” he said.

Lawrence closed his eyes as he did the math. “Almost eighteen million. God, my whole body is tingling. Look at that.” His right hand shook in the beam of his headlamp.

Abigail glanced over her shoulder, saw June wandering off into another part of the mine.

“I’m gonna go check on her,” she said.

Abigail struggled to her feet, walked over to June, found her staggering through the dark, shaking her head and muttering to herself.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Abigail asked. “You okay?”

When June looked back, her face had gone pallid and chalky, her eyes sunken, the small woman as bloodless as a cadaver.

She turned suddenly and vomited on the rock.

1893

56

When Stephen Cole raised his left arm, the noise in the chamber began to wane. Soon there was no sound but the occasional squall of a child. He stood in the center of the cavern, taking a moment to regard the horrified faces—these men, women, and children of Abandon who sat huddled together along the walls.

“Would you close your eyes with me?” he said.

Hats came off. Heads bowed. Children were shushed.

“Father.” Stephen Cole fell to his knees. “We come before You on this, the night of our Savior’s birth, a greedy, wicked, corrupt assembly. It is a dark hour. We have provoked Your wrath and for that I fall on my face and beseech Your forgiveness.” The preacher prostrated himself, his cheek against the cold rock floor. “I lift up the children to You, dear God. Children! I beg You.” His voice unraveled. “I *beg* You. Deliver them. Let them not be afraid, and if it be possible, allow this cup to pass.” The preacher’s tears ran down into the crevices of the rock. He whispered, “What of grace? Oh, my Father, what of grace? But not as I, but as Thou wilt. In Your Son’s holy name. Amen.”

Stephen wiped his face and rose to his feet, dusted the silt from his greatcoat, replaced his visored felt hat. He approached the town blacksmith, a small, well-liked man named Mason Stetler.

“Mason,” he said, “I leave the town to your care. You’re capitan. I’m going out that door now, and I’m going alone. If you hear a knock in quick intervals of three, know that it’s me, but don’t open it for any other reason. Better paint for war.”

“Mind your hair, Stephen. Got a shootin iron?”

“Yes.”

Someone grabbed Stephen’s arm. He turned, faced Gloria Curtice, her wet, probing eyes still grasping for a shred of hope.

Stephen shook his head and embraced her. “Zeke is with our Lord now,” he whispered. “With your little boy. Be dreadnought.”

Her knees failed. As Gloria collapsed, wailing on the floor, her anguish masked another sound that emanated from the nearby passage—loud but brief, a sharp cry of pain.

• • •

Stephen carried a shadowgee, an old Colt single-action Army, and a shotgun up the tunnel. When he stepped out onto the ledge, he extinguished the flame and sat down on the rock. It was a good, protected rincon. The sun had gone away and bled the clouds into a deepening blue that cast the mountains in a gray-metal twilight.

He gazed down on Abandon situated in the gloom of the canyon floor, lifeless and dark, wondering how those six men fared who'd ridden up to the pass.

He wasn't afraid, enwrapped instead in the clutches of the most peculiar detachment he'd ever known, as if he existed somewhere above himself, watching everything unfold apart from the fear and the anticipation.

Still, a part of him kept listening for gunshots, unsure if the crack of their reports could carry this far from the pass.

Soon it was full-on night. He grew cold, his head exploding now.

Down in the canyon, specks of firelight winked on.

He returned to himself. His hands shook.

As the procession of lights moved through the empty town, Stephen took two shells from the pocket of his greatcoat and broke the breech of the double-barreled shotgun, whispering as he slid them home, "Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee? Shall Thy loving-kindness be declared in the grave? Or Thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark?"

The scalp hunters were already to the north end of Abandon, and Stephen watched them turn their mounts toward the chapel, following the tracks of the fleeing townspeople. His lips moved again in the dark, "Oh, my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass."

• • •

Joss emerged from the passage and took a seat on the outskirts of the cavern, her hands hidden under her serape, blackened and sticky with blood. If a saloon regular saw her, they might puzzle at Al's absence. A reasonable explanation would be required.

She'd just set about inventing that lie when the roar of a shotgun filled the passage outside the iron door.

Everyone made a collective gasp, children crying, Mason Stetler yelling for every able man with a weapon to come forward, almost two dozen springing up, crowding the iron door in a ragtag battalion.

They waited.

Joss counted five staccato shots from a revolver. Three shotgun blasts. Then silence.

• • •

Stephen dropped two shells into the shotgun and reloaded the revolver from his cartridge belt.

Two heathens dead in the tunnel behind him. Two on the brink.

He was unscathed, but his heart beat so fast, he couldn't think.

More lights approached, already to the chapel several hundred feet below. He could hear their horses snorting, the sound of hooves breaking through powder.

He took several steps back into the tunnel, his whole body quaking. He closed his eyes, tried to still himself.

The riders closed in on the rimrock.

He exhaled when he saw Oatha Wallace and Billy McCabe dismount. They waded through the snow and climbed up onto the ledge, stood just outside the entrance to the mine.

Oatha's claybank eyed the preacher warily, and as had happened on more than one occasion in the last week, Stephen saw the horse's brown teeth lengthen and sharpen in the firelight.

Oatha hawked his plug of tobacco into the snow. His lantern hung down at the level of his knees, his face and Billy's all gone to shadow and grotesque patterns of light, eyes shining, breath vapors clouding. Oatha wiped the tobacco juice from his chin with the back of his glove.

"You know somethin, Preach," he said. "I'm feelin a little red-eyed toward you."

"Why's that, Mr. Wallace?"

"Weren't no injerns up at the Sawblade. We rode around for—"

Movement in the tunnel drew Oatha's eye.

He raised the lantern, peered around Stephen, the firelight falling upon one of his fellow miners, John Hurwitz, dragging himself off a pile of

bodies, whimpering, his blood running out ahead of him down into the mine.

“The fuck’s goin—”

At close range, the buckshot excavated most of Oatha’s face.

His knees locked, and he pitched backward over the ledge.

Billy had caught only a few pellets in the right shoulder, but as he reached for his Walker, the preacher blew a ragged, gaping hole in the boy’s chest.

Billy sat down on the ledge. He cupped his gloves to catch the steaming handfuls that fell out of him, looking up at the preacher, struggling to breathe, eyes asquint with profound aggrievement.

Stephen threw down the shotgun and pulled the revolver.

“God save your soul,” he said, and shot the boy between the eyes.

2009

57

Abigail patted June's back. "Feel better now?"

June shook her head and spit onto the rock.

Lawrence jogged over from the alcove, asked, "What happened?"

"She threw up."

"I didn't even think about the air. It might be bad. Abby, do you feel strange or woozy?"

June stood upright, wiped the sweat from her face, said in a voice that bordered on defiance, "It's not the air." She moved away from them, into the darkness, her headlamp flickering across the walls, the ceiling. From twenty feet back, Abigail could barely see her in the fading light of her lamp—just her legs and the illuminated rock around her boots.

June suddenly sank down onto the floor and convulsed violently, legs bouncing up and down on the rock, arms flailing as if in the throes of electrocution.

Abigail ran to her, dropped to her knees, tried to steady June's limbs, whispering, "Oh Jesus, oh Jesus. June, look at me."

June went still, her eyes open and glassy and staring straight up at the ceiling, mouth agape, chest heaving up and down.

"Talk to me," Abigail pleaded. "Please say something. I need to know you can hear me."

As Abigail reached out to hold June's hand, the beam of her headlamp struck on something. She froze. The blood in her veins and arteries and the oxygen in her lungs seemed to congeal. She made an involuntary sound, something like a mewl.

The hand of an infant had caught her eye, less than five feet from where she knelt, the bones clearly visible—brown and tiny and perfect, clasping the phalanges of a larger hand. She turned her headlamp away, but it passed over another skeleton, this one adorned with strands of long blond hair that had matted to the skull, and still boasting jewelry—a gold wedding band on the long, brittle phalange of the ring finger and a necklace dangling from one of the upper vertebra into the rib cage.

Lawrence said, "Quinn, you need to come see this!"

June and Abigail got up. They stood in the center of a large cavern teeming with the bones of Abandon—at least a hundred skeletons, most still intact, their clothes having long since disintegrated in the cold storage of the cave, moist enough to support the growth of a hairy white fungus that overspread portions of the rock like a network of capillaries. The skeletons were of every size and scattered throughout the chamber in a vast array of death poses, the scene reminding Abigail of some morbid sculpture exhibit. Her stomach was churning, and she wanted to shut her eyes to it, but she knew that would make little difference. This mine and its occupants would stay with her for the rest of her life, in waking moments, in dreams.

They drifted wordlessly through the crypt. Most of the skeletons were sprawled across the floor, as if they had lain down en masse to die. Abigail saw one curled up in the fetal position in a corner. Another lay beside a small boulder, its skull cracked, pieces of it on the rock floor, pigmented in proximity with the deepest burgundy shade of ancient blood. A pair of skeletons lay along the wall, their humerus and radius bones intertwined, having perished in each other's arms.

Abigail felt herself coming undone as the images of the dying townsfolk accumulated.

A skull resting in the lap of another skeleton.

On a pair of femurs, the leather binding of a pageless King James Bible.

Between kneecaps, a clear corked bottle still holding an inch of century-old whiskey.

Skeletons sitting up grasping shotguns and rifles and revolvers, the wood stocks badly rotted or gone altogether, others clasping bricks of gold with their browned finger bones.

A handful clinging to the remains of their children.

And under a rusted-out shadowgee, a skeleton with long black hair tweaked both her horror and curiosity at once. On the wide plates of its browned pelvis lay minute femurs and tibias and ribs, a skull the size of an apple, phalanges no thicker than matches, and when she realized these constituted the bones of a mother and its fetus, Abigail broke down.

Lawrence walked over and sat with her. "I know," he whispered. "It's a lot to take in."

"Guys?" June said. "Would you mind turning your headlamps off? I've got Emmett's camera with me, and …" She was crying again. "He'd want

me to shoot this for him.”

They switched off their headlamps, Abigail hating the darkness, not even the faintest presence of light to adapt to in this pure, unfiltered black. She gave June one minute, listening to the click of the camera echo through the chamber and the distant drip of water. She finally said, “Sorry, but I’m turning my headlamp back on. I’m too freaked-out to just sit here in the dark.” She found breathing easier with her headlamp on. “You must be beside yourself, huh, Lawrence?”

“This is beyond anything I ever dreamed of finding. The gold and the entire town, in the same place, at the same time.”

“It’s gonna be amazing material. This’ll turn out great articles for both of “I don’t know about you, but I plan to write a book.” Lawrence stood up, offered Abigail his hand, but she didn’t take it, just sat there staring at a coal-oil lantern capsized between two femurs. “Abby? You all right?”

“I don’t know how to process it all. Everything we’ve been through tonight.”

Lawrence hollered through the chamber, “Quinn! Come in here! *Have you seen this?* We found Abandon! They’re all in here!” Lawrence tapped his headlamp. “Damn, my light’s dying. Walk with me back to the entrance, Abby.”

They crossed the uneven rock, working their way among the skeletons.

“There he is,” Lawrence said, pointing to the bulb of light thirty feet ahead. “Hey, professor, you really need to come in here, see all the bones.”

When Abigail’s headlamp struck Quinn, he was zipping his backpack.

He glanced up at them, said, “I hope it’s enough, Lawrence.”

“What? The gold? Of course, eighteen million is plenty for every—”

“I’m not talking about the gold.” Quinn shouldered the sagging backpack. “I mean knowing what happened to the town. You spent a good part of your life trying to solve that mystery, and I want you to know I sincerely hope it’s a good consolation.”

“For what?”

Quinn stepped into the passage. The door to the mine slammed shut in a thunderous concussion of metal on metal, and its echo seemed to last forever. Then came a sound Abigail had already heard once before—the squeak of that rusted bolt sliding home inside the iron door, then the crossbar dropping into the brackets, then that giant padlock locking back.

1893

58

Gloria and Rosalyn sat against the rock wall, holding each other and listening to the burgeoning chaos near the iron door, where twenty armed men had gathered after hearing gunshots in the passage. But that had been some time ago. The men were growing antsy.

Someone said, “Time we rain hell on some red niggers.”

“Preacher said to wait until—”

“And what if that fire escape’s already lost his hair? Considered that? Sounded like quite a powder-burnin contest out there.”

“Mason, get up here and bring the key with ye! We done waitin!”

Gloria watched the unassuming smith push his way through the cluster of miners, heading to the iron door.

“What’d you say?”

She couldn’t see Stetler, who was surrounded by the mob of taller men, but his voice rose above the bedlam, far deeper and louder than his size seemed to accord.

“Said we need the key to this door. I do believe that’s the only way to open it from inside.”

“You see a keyhole there, Will?”

“What are you talkin about?”

“Preacher asked for the key, and I give it to him. What’s it matter anyway? This door only opens from the outside.”

“The fuck you do that for?”

“He asked for it!”

“Jesus. He gets himself kilt, *how we gonna get out?”*

Stetler ran his fingernails over the rippled surface of his bald head, which glistened with rivulets of sweat.

A miner said, “We better find some bang juice and powder. Blow that hunk a iron off its hinges.”

One of the Godsend’s dynos said, “Y’all not see this door when we come in? It’s a inch thick. Amount a powder it’d take to blow it open, be a long chance this whole damn mine didn’t come down on us.”

Gloria turned to Rosalyn, whispered, “I can’t listen to them anymore. Will you stroke my hair if I put my head in your lap? Like you was doin

before?”

“Of course, honey. Come here.”

59

Harriet McCabe lay in the middle row of pews, hiding. There had been gunshots a short time ago, but it was quiet now save for the wind. She thought about her mama. Her friend Bethany. Her new doll, Samantha, which she'd had to leave behind at the shack. She was thirsty, hungry, but more than anything, cold and scared.

The sun had gone to bed, and the wind made a long low sound as it pushed against the boarded-up windows, the tiny church swaying and creaking like the hold of a ship, icy air filtering up through the space between the planks.

She shivered under her mama's gray woolen cloak. Just across the aisle stood a stove in a gap between the pews, a stack of logs next to it, and she'd just decided to light a fire, when the chapel doors flung open. Harriet gasped, brought her hand to her mouth. The doors slammed shut, the plank boards groaning beneath the weight of approaching footsteps.

She rolled under the pew, watched a pair of arctics pass two feet from her head. Toward the front of the church, something thumped on the floor, and Harriet scrambled quietly to her feet, peered over the top of the bench. She saw someone in the shadow of the nave. The man was on his knees, facing the barrier separating the front pews from the stage, his arms lifted, hands open to the simple wooden cross mounted on the wall behind the pulpit.

When he spoke, she startled, his voice loud enough to fill the sanctuary, though faltering and brittle as sandstone.

"It is finished, Lord God. Your good and faithful servant kneels before You to say that Your will … has been done."

He suddenly fell over, his stomach flat against the floorboards.

Harriet thought he'd died, until he wept, softly at first, then outright sobbing, pounding the planks with his fists. Harriet had seen her daddy cry once before, but not like this. She'd never seen anyone in such soul-splitting anguish.

"*Why?*" The word exploded—guttural, ragged, raw. He screamed it three times, so loudly that Harriet thought it might shatter the glass of those tall south-facing windows. He got back onto his knees, and when he spoke again, Harriet had to strain to hear the words.

“You say You love truth. Well, here’s my truth. I don’t know who You are right now. I don’t understand how the Creator of love and mercy and compassion, the God who seared my heart in Charleston, can command His servant to lock a town into a mountain. Women! Children! How can a child give You such offense? Are You not the God I think You are? Of David? Of Christ? You are ultimate, whatever Your nature, but I need to know if I’ve been wrong about You. Correct my perception. You know I love You. That I chose a cimarron’s life in Your service, over a woman who still haunts my dreams. If You love me, Lord, if You love me at all, infuse me with a peace that passeth all understanding. Because I need it now. I’m in a bad way. This is my deepest trench, and I may not see the morning. Don’t draw back from me. I’ve destroyed myself for You, and I am so alone.”

He bowed his head, and as he cried, Stephen felt something graze his shoulder. He spun around and fell back, bristling with fear. A little girl stood before him in the darkening nave, her curls pitch-black and her eyes aching with hunger.

“Why you sad?” she asked.

Stephen pulled his cape around and wiped his face with it.

“You buggered me. How’d you get out of the mine, Harriet?”

“I been here since long before you came, hidin from injuns.”

“You shouldn’t have left your mama.”

Stephen reached forward, wrapped the cloak tighter around her small frame. “You’re shivering,” he said. “Let’s see if we can remedy that.” He stood up and took the little girl’s hand and led her over to the stove. Inside, balled-up sheets of the *Silverton Standard and Miner* awaited a Sunday service that would never come. A wicker basket full of dried-out fir cones sat under the closest pew, and Stephen took a handful and arranged the kindling and shoved in two logs. One strike from his machero did the job. He left the iron door open, and soon the flames raged, sending out eddies of heat, throwing firelight on the walls, the cold plank floor, the vaulted ceiling.

“Scoot up close, sweetie. I want you to get warm.”

Harriet extended her hands toward the open door and Stephen sat behind her, setting his hat on the floor, tying his hair up. He pulled a small bottle out of his pocket.

“Here, sip this tincture of arnica,” he said.

She unscrewed the cap, took a swallow, handed the bottle back.

“What are all those dots on your face?” she asked.

“Nothing.” Stephen wiped the sticky specks of her father’s blood from his brow, his cheeks, his mouth. Then he reached into his greatcoat and withdrew the single-action army revolver, opened the loading gate behind the cylinder. Three cartridges left.

Is this Your will, God? That I shoot Your child in the back of the head. Because I will do it. I am your faithful servant, but please. Please. If there is any other way …

“I’m hungry,” Harriet said.

“We’ll get something in our bellies here in a minute.”

He coughed to mask the sound of the hammer thumbing back.

“I got a doll for Christmas, Mr. Cole.”

Stephen blinked through the tears. “What’s her name?” He choked on the words as he put the revolver to the back of her head.

“Samantha. She has red hair.”

He knew he’d be sick after, fought off the urge to jam the barrel down his own throat. *Is this Your will? Speak now or forever—*

“She has two dresses, and my favorite thing is to comb her hair.”

When Stephen touched the trigger, it came—peace flooding through him, warm liquid light. “Thank you,” he whispered, and slid the revolver back into his coat.

Harriet glanced back, said, “You’re cryin again.”

“It’s okay. These are happy tears. God is so good.”

Harriet cocked her head. “Where are all the injuns?” she asked.

“How old are you, Harriet?”

“Six years.”

“I think you’re old enough to know something. Last night, God spoke to me. He told me that His judgment was coming down upon Abandon, that I was to be the instrument of His wrath, His brimstone and fire.”

“So there weren’t ever any heathens?”

“No, although at times today, God allowed me to believe there were. He let me see the heathens when I was standing at the Sawblade. Let me believe the lie. Showed me how to use it.”

“Then where’d everbody go?”

“Do you believe in God, Harriet?”

“Yes.”

“Does your father ever get upset with you? Like when you’re disobedient? When you don’t listen to what he says?”

“Yeah, when Mama’s gone, he hits my bottom real hard with the metal part of his belt.”

“But that’s his job to punish you when you misbehave. In the same way, God is the father of Abandon, and all the people who live here are His children. But do you know what?”

“What?”

“The people of this town were very wicked.”

“Why?”

“They were greedy. Sinful. They didn’t love God. Thought only of themselves and what they wanted. They were obsessed with gold, and some of them were very evil and did terrible things to others. They took what didn’t belong to them. Caused incredible pain.”

“That’s wrong. You’re supposed to be nice.”

“Yes, you are. And that’s why God decided to punish everyone who lived in Abandon.”

“What about Bethany and Mama?”

“Even them.”

“But they aren’t evil, are they?”

“Listen, Harriet. We can’t start questioning God. Why He chooses to punish some but not others. We might not understand, but that’s our shortcoming. We can only love and obey Him.”

Her bottom lip began to quiver. “I wanna see Mama.”

“Come on, sweetie. Listen to me. God told me not to punish you. That He loves you. That your heart is good. He wants me to take care of you.”

“What about Mama and Daddy?”

“You need to shuck that question. Don’t ask it again.”

Harriet turned away from him and stared into the flames. Stephen put his hands on her delicate shoulders. “Let’s walk to my cabin,” he said. “I’ll build another fire and make us supper.”

“Did God punish Samantha?”

“No, sweetheart.”

“She’s alone and scared at home on my bed.”

Stephen stood up, so tired that he felt he could lie down on his pine-bough mattress and sleep for thirty years.

“We’ll stop by your old house and get her.”

Stephen helped Harriet up and took her by the hand. Then the preacher and the child walked out of the church together.

The night was clear, the moon full and rising.

Infuse me with a peace that passeth all understanding.

Pinpoints of starlight twinkled, among them the rusty bulb of Mars.

Abandon lay dark and silent in its canyon, and from high above, Stephen heard a faint sound like a distant stamp mill.

They were beating on that iron door inside the mountain.

2009

60

Abigail approached the iron door—no handle, no doorknob, no keyhole. Lawrence came up and pushed against it and yelled Quinn's name.

She tried to rein back the fear in her voice. "Did that just happen?"

Lawrence backpedaled, then ran at the door and drove the heel of his boot into the metal.

It made a clatter that resonated through the cavern and died.

He collapsed on the rock and squeezed his ankle, wincing from the pain. Around the door's perimeter, the rock had been worn down, chipped away. Abigail shone her headlamp over the surface of the metal. It was covered in marks of desperation—dings and numerous indentations, as if someone had assaulted the door with an assortment of implements. She saw bullet grooves, scattered dimples created by buckshot. In the middle section, a large swath of metal had been dented in, and she imagined only a boulder carried by a group of men could have made such an impression in the indomitable door.

June wandered over from the chamber. "What happened?" she asked.

"Quinn locked us in."

"Why in the world would he do that?"

"No idea."

June spent a moment pushing on the door. She suddenly screamed Quinn's name.

"Save your energy," Abigail said. "I think people have tried everything to break it down. Even ramming a boulder into it. And they, um, they obviously didn't make it out."

"Oh my God. We're gonna die in here like the rest of them." She staggered back and began to hyperventilate. "How is this … how is this—"

"Okay, hang on." Lawrence struggled up off the rock. "Let's everybody just take a breath. We can all get horrified and hysterical, but how's that gonna save our lives? We're still gonna be right here when we finally calm down, locked inside this mountain. So let's skip the part where everyone freaks out. Most important thing now is light. It's as important as oxygen, and it's running out. We only need one headlamp going. Turn yours off. I'll keep mine on." Two headlamps went dark. "All right. Backpacks. Let's find

out what supplies we have to work with. I think I left … Fuck.” Lawrence ran over to the alcove and swept his headlamp in the vicinity of the ten burlap sacks. “It isn’t here. I left my pack near the gold, and now it’s gone. I had some rope. Batteries. Water.”

“Mine’s gone, too,” June said. “I left it by the door before we walked into the chamber. All I have is Em’s camera.”

“I still have mine,” Abigail said. She unclipped her hip belt and knelt down on the rock and unzipped it as Lawrence provided light. “So, I’ve got … not much. Gloves. Hat. Notepad. Roll of film. Two granola bars. Matches. Two water bottles, but only one’s full. Damn, I thought I had extra batteries.”

“All right, let’s sit down and talk this out. I’m turning my headlamp off for now.”

They sat together in the perfect darkness, fifteen feet from the iron door. Abigail closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths in an attempt to slow her heart and settle her mind.

Lawrence said, “I know it’s creepy in here, and we’re surrounded by the remains of people who died because they were locked in this mine, but I would urge us to keep them and their fate as far from our thoughts as possible.”

June wept softly. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’m trying not to.”

Abigail reached out, took hold of her hand.

“We have three headlamps, and the brutal truth is, if we run out of light before we find a way out, we will die in here. We should store the headlamps we aren’t using in Abby’s pack so they don’t get damaged. We also have thirty-two ounces of water. That’s barely more than a glass each. We’ll drink in small sips, every few hours, make it last as long as possible. Hopefully, there’s water somewhere in this cave. Who knows if it’s fit to drink, but we may have to try. Same deal with the granola bars. We’ll ration them out in little bites over time.”

“How long can we survive once the water runs out?” June asked.

“Three days. Maybe longer, since heat’s not gonna be an issue. So now we have an important decision to make. We can’t just sit here and hope to be rescued, because even if search-and-rescue comes to Abandon looking for us, they sure as hell won’t find us in here.”

“Maybe we could get some rocks and chip away around the door,” June said.

Abigail said, “That’s one option, but I looked at the door, and it’s my sense that *that’s* the big mistake the residents of Abandon made. They tried to break down the door or to chip around it. But this is hard, hard rock in here, and I’m certain we’d die of thirst before we made any real progress. I bet that most of the people in here wore themselves out fooling with that door. Then all they could do was lie down in that chamber to die, with no strength left to go look for more water or another way out.”

“And no more light,” Lawrence said.

“Exactly. I mean, all the residents of Abandon couldn’t break through that door. We have no chance.”

“Then what’s the alternative?” June asked.

Lawrence said, “Looks to me like this is a mine that, as the men were blasting and expanding it, encroached into a natural cave. I’m sure that door is not the only exit from this mountain. I know we’re tired, but I think we have to get up right now, while we still have a little strength and food and water, and try to find another way out.”

June said, “You’re suggesting we wander blindly through a cave?”

“You see another viable option?”

“What if we get lost?”

“We’re already lost. Pretend that door isn’t there, that it’s solid rock. Might as well be.”

Abigail said, “It scares me to death, but yeah, I agree that’s our only option at this point.”

“Should we split up?” June asked. “That would increase our chances of finding a way out.”

“Actually, it wouldn’t. Because we’re on the clock here in terms of light, we can only spend as much time looking for another exit as our batteries allow. If we split up, we’ll be burning through our headlamps twice or three times as fast.”

June said, “If anyone had ever made it out of this mine alive, you’d have heard about it. Right, Lawrence?”

He turned on his headlamp, and the others blinked in the sudden light.

“More than likely.”

1893

61

It took eight miners to hoist the boulder—seven hundred pounds of solid granite that ignited back cracking and groans. They started in the chamber, fifteen yards back, freighting it slowly over the rock, carefully accelerating to a jog as they neared the iron door.

The collision was tremendous. The front third of the boulder shivered off and broke the feet of three men.

The surface of the door had barely caved.

The Godsend's cager grabbed a hammer shotgun leaning against the wall, sited up the door, fired a shell of buckshot.

As the metal sparked, other men drew their revolvers and rifles, hammers squeezing back, levers cocking, the mine exploding in a cacophony of gunfire and filling with an acrid haze.

When the shooting stopped, the door stood defiant, the metal covered in silver chinks but no real damage done, except for the young man who lay quivering on the floor, a hole through his cheek, blood frothing out of his mouth onto the rock in a pink geyser.

Voices rose up, growing louder, competing to be heard.

Stetler held up two shadowgees and hollered for silence, but no one listened in the swarm of shouting men.

"We're all gonna peg out now."

"Better save the lump oil."

"Keep chargin the door."

"Used to could go that way, but the shoot's caved in."

"No food, no water."

"Preacher left us in the soup!"

"Gonna run out a light!"

"Hobble your lips!"

"Don't know your ass from a hole in the ground."

"Shut the fuck up!"

Meanwhile, Bessie McCabe stood in the center of the chamber, screaming for Harriet again, screaming until she couldn't breathe, until she felt like she was suffocating on choke damp, the chaos only stoking the hysteria in her head.

She overloaded, spotted the small boulder, fell to her knees, and crawled toward it.

She heard the miners shooting again, babies screaming, someone praying nearby.

Bessie got up on her knees, found two handholds in the rock, and, with every ounce of strength and zero hesitation, slammed her head down into the boulder. She heard the crack before she felt it, and blood ran between her eyes. When she came to, the cavern was inverted and spinning. She struggled back onto her knees, located the handholds, and managed two more blows before losing consciousness again. The next time she came around, she knew she'd done the job. A crowd of revolving, blurry faces surrounded her, and their voices and the gunshots and weeping and shouting all blended into a steady rush like the noise of a waterfall.

Her head lay in a warm, expanding pool, and she knew it was her blood and hoped it meant the end, thinking only of her daughter now, praying the injuns hadn't gotten her, and that wherever she awoke, Harriet would be there, too.

As her brain seized, she went back almost ten months, to a February morning on the plains of west Kansas, she and Harriet aboard a Union Pacific train chugging to Denver.

Staring off in the distance, she'd seen them lifting out of the horizon like a bank of clouds, thought they were coming into weather until she overheard another passenger say to his companion, "Have a look at the Snowy Range."

And as she died on the floor of that mine on Christmas night, she relived with a sort of bewildered nostalgia all the excitement she'd felt, watching the Front Range rise and rise as the train steamed west, a dream and a dare at once.

She'd pulled Harriet into her lap and pointed out the window.

"That's where Daddy is and where we're goin. That's our future, sweet pea."

And she'd believed it, too.

With all her heart.

2009

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Starting out proved simple enough. They took the only passage that branched off from the chamber, Lawrence leading with the headlamp, followed by Abigail and June.

They hadn't walked thirty feet before Lawrence stopped, said, "Well, guys, here we are. First choice of many." The main tunnel continued on, at least as far as his headlamp shone, but there was also an opening in the rock nearby. Lawrence knelt down, looked through the hole. "A snug fit, but it definitely goes somewhere."

"Don't you think we should stick with the larger passageways?" Abigail asked.

"I honestly don't—" He gasped. "There's a skeleton in here and a pair of wrist irons. This might have been a prisoner. Yeah, let's stick with the main passage for now."

So they continued on, soon leaving all signs of mining activity—holes drilled in the rock for dynamite, rusted cans of black blasting powder, empty carbide kegs, strips of railroad track, drill steels, support timbers—and emerged into a natural cave, ceasing to follow the path of any particular tunnel, moving instead from room to room, some smaller than a closet, others larger than that first cavern, and the rock formations becoming more alien the deeper they ventured. Stalactites hung down from the roof, spilling their corrosive solutions into drip holes on the floor. Abigail ran her hands over walls of breccia—fragments of rock, fossils of bone and prehistoric crustaceans cemented together in sandstone.

An hour in, they came upon a richly decorated grotto. Lawrence's headlamp shone up at the ceiling, where stalactites bunched together, row upon row, like sharks' teeth. In the center, they'd melded into a strange conglomerate that reminded Abigail of a chandelier. Against the nearest wall, they resembled a pipe organ. In a far corner, the long tentacles of jellyfish.

They wandered into a smooth-walled tube, the ceiling just a foot above Lawrence's head. As they progressed through the elliptical passage, the walls grew farther apart and the ceiling lowered. Soon they had to walk hunched over, then squatting, then crawling on their knees, and finally their

bellies, dragging themselves through the flattener on their forearms, just sixteen inches between the ceiling and the floor.

They'd been moving along this way for five minutes when Abigail yelled, "I'm getting claustrophobic!" She couldn't see Lawrence's light, felt trapped in total darkness, the warmth of her own breath blowing back into her face when she exhaled against the rock.

Something grabbed her ankle, but there wasn't enough space to turn her head.

June whispered, "They're all around us, Abigail. They won't stop talking to me."

Lawrence yelled back, "I hear something up ahead!"

They pushed on, the ceiling scraping the top of Abigail's head, her left leg beginning to bleed again, the crawling murder on her tailbone. *I can't breathe,* she thought. Then, *Yes, you can. It's just in your mind.* She had to tilt her head to the side and flatten her shoulders in order to writhe her way through. *What if we get stuck? I can't even move my limbs enough to turn myself around. This would be a horrible way to die.*

June cried, whispering in the darkness behind her, and Abigail had started to tell Lawrence to just turn the fuck around when she heard it, too—white noise.

The bulb of his headlamp swung toward her. "You're almost there," he said. Where the tube ended, less than a foot of space remained between the floor and the ceiling. Abigail squeezed her way through, and Lawrence grabbed her by the arms, helped her find her footing.

"Where is this?" she asked. Lawrence turned and let his light run up the sixty-foot walls of an immense hall. "Oh my God." They stood at the edge of a subterranean lake, fifty feet across, two feet deep. On the other side, a four-foot waterfall plunged into a pool out of a fissure in the rock. The pool overflowed, fed the lake, the lake flooding into a hole that chuted the mineral water into the depths of the mountain. The hall resonated with the crush of the waterfall, and the sound made Abigail think of her favorite spot in Central Park—the fountain at Cherry Hill. If you sat close, it was loud enough to drown out the city noise.

While Lawrence helped June out of the tube, Abigail bent down to touch the inky water—freezing cold, barely the temperature of fresh snowmelt.

When the beam of Lawrence's headlamp passed over the surface, she saw that the lakebed consisted of white crystals. Tiny translucent fish swam among them, eyeless in the dark.

They sat on the rock shore of that lake, caught in eternal night, sharing sips of water and pieces of a granola bar. Abigail's head dropped and her eyes closed.

• • •

"Wake up, Abby. We have to keep moving."

She sat up, rubbed her eyes. "How long was I asleep?"

"Five minutes."

"Where's June?" He pointed to a breakdown on the far side of the lake, where a section of the ceiling had fallen. June crawled around on the rock.

"She's acting strange, huh?" Lawrence said.

"Her husband was murdered in front of her. You forget that?"

They followed the shore to the breakdown and joined June on the shattered rock.

"What I'm thinking," Lawrence said, "is that maybe these rocks and boulders are blocking the opening of another passage. Help me move some of this."

"No," June said. "Leave it be. That's a bad place."

"Sorry, but I don't see another easy way out of this hall."

Abigail and Lawrence began picking up the rocks they could handle, tossing them aside. As she worked to clear the scree, Abigail realized she'd already begun to lose her sense of time. It seemed possible they'd been in this cave for an entire day.

As she lifted one of the larger rocks and dropped it on the growing pile, the waft hit her.

Abigail stepped back. "You smell that? It's like … rotten eggs. Come give me some light, Lawrence. I may have broken through."

Lawrence moved one more rock, the opening now spacious enough for them to climb through. He shined the light inside, said, "Damn, it's just a tiny—"

Abigail shrieked.

Lawrence looked in again, jerked back. "Oh Jesus."

“Is she alive?” Abigail whispered. “She looks very alive.” The breakdown had covered a recess in the wall, and inside, a young woman leaned against a flat-topped rock, her left arm draped over a colony of gypsum flowers, their crystal blooms curling between her fingers. She was naked, slender but curvy, her head resting in the crook of her arm, as if she’d just sat down and gone to sleep, her left hand coated in wax.

Lawrence whispered, “Beautiful.” Her hair was long and black and her full lips still held color—deep maroon. She was pink-skinned, blood still in her veins.

“She must have just gotten trapped in there,” Abigail said.

“No, I believe this woman was alive in Abandon in 1893.”

“You’re telling me this flawless corpse is a hundred and sixteen years old?”

“Look at the pile of clothes. Those boots. ‘Custom-mades,’ they called them. Those canvas trousers, the shawl. Look like the outfit of a modern-day woman to you?”

“That’s impossible. There’s no decay. She hardly looks dead.”

“I know. It’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen.” He stepped back from the opening and inhaled a few clean breaths of air. “That rotten-egg smell?” he said. “Sulfur gas. Very toxic and probably what killed this woman. But it also preserved her, killing all the aerobic bacteria inside her and around her. That Christmas in Abandon, she was probably doing what we’re doing now—just trying to find a way out. Maybe she saw this nook, decided to rest. Then the ceiling came down, entombed her, sealed her in. In an airtight environment, the sulfur gas had nowhere to go, so there’s no decomposition. Kept her literally frozen in time. Look at her. That’s the face of someone who lived and breathed in the town of Abandon. Bet she had a story to tell. God, she’s lovely.”

June suddenly screamed, “She’s looking at me! She won’t stop looking at me!”

Abigail said, “That woman’s dead, honey. Been that way for quite a while.”

Lawrence lifted a rock, placed it back in front of the opening.

“What are you doing?” Abigail asked.

“If fresh air gets in, she will decay. We should seal it back up, leave her as we found her.”

63

They climbed out of the waterfall room through a blind shaft that accessed another passage, spent several hours moving through a network of tunnels that crisscrossed and dead-ended and turned back into themselves. For the first time, Abigail felt lost.

• • •

They stopped to rest in a room where the stalactites and stalagmites had merged together in the shape of hourglass columns. Abigail sat up against the cold calcite, staring at her watch—11:03 A.M. They'd been rambling through the cave for five and a half hours. She hadn't had any meaningful sleep for twenty-nine.

"I really need to rest," Abigail said. "I'm on fumes here."

Lawrence said, "These daylight hours are too precious to waste. There's no point searching for a way out at night. Suppose we walked through a room when it was dark outside that had a daylight hole. We'd never know. So we have to keep going until the sun sets."

"But that's another eight hours. I can't—"

"Abby, do you understand that we have maybe three or four days to find a way out? And that after that, without water, we'll be too weak to cover any ground? It'll be over for us then."

She rested her forehead on her knees and cried.

• • •

The constant motion of Lawrence's light beam wreaked havoc on Abigail's stomach. Or maybe it was this cold, deep, underground air, the jagged rock walls narrowing over the last fifty yards, the tunnel beginning to slope gradually down. Abigail thought, *Great, we're going* deeper *into the mountain.*

She instantly felt guilty for complaining to herself. Bad as things were, the last twelve hours had been infinitely worse to June.

"How you holding up?" Abigail asked. "We can rest anytime you want. Just say when." June made no response. Glancing back, Abigail said, "Everything all—" Even in the paltry shreds of light that slipped back from

her father's headlamp, Abigail could see that there was no one behind her. "Lawrence, she's gone."

He stopped, shone his headlamp back up the empty tunnel. "How long?"

"I don't know. Those were the first words I'd said to her in ten or fifteen minutes."

"June!" Lawrence screamed. His voice ricocheted down the tunnel, stirred up a single echo, and quickly died away.

No answer.

"Well, come on," Abigail said. "We have to find her."

They jogged back up the tunnel. After a minute or so, Abigail thought she heard something.

"Lawrence," she said. "Lawrence!" He spun around. "I think I heard—"

A scream exploded from the bowels of the mountain. It ended abruptly, but its reverberations went on and on.

Lawrence said, "What the hell?"

"Was that June?" Another scream ripped through the cave, this one farther away. "She sounds like she's in agony," Abigail said.

They rushed up the tunnel as the screaming continued, arrived after two minutes of hard running at a split in the passage.

A woman's voice shouted, "WHERE ARE YOU?"

"I can't tell which one it's coming from," Abigail said.

"PLEASE, GOD, JUST KILL ME!"

"This way," Lawrence said, and he started into the larger of the two passageways.

"I'M SO THIRSTY!"

They moved through a series of grottoes, the screams getting louder.

"I'M STILL ALIVE! PLEASE! FINISH IT! KILL ME!"

Lawrence stopped.

"What's wrong?" Abigail whispered.

He shook his head. "Thought I saw something in that room up ahead."

"What?"

"I'm not sure. It moved fast. Forget it."

"I don't hear her anymore."

Lawrence shouted, "*June, where are you?* Help us find you!"

The cave seemed to hold its breath.

"I hate this place," Abigail said.

They worked their way through a forest of stalagmites interspersed with pillars of bedrock, coming at last into a stagnant room with feathery blue fungi clinging to the walls and moving in slow-motion waves, like underwater sea grass.

Three steps into the next room, Lawrence froze, and Abigail heard him whisper, “My God.” As he sank down onto the floor, his headlamp shone on the expanding pool of dark blood that flowed out of June Tozer’s head.

She lay on her back beside the small boulder she’d used.

“Everything’s spinning,” she mumbled. They knelt at June’s side. Abigail took her hand, laced their fingers. In the poor light, only the volume of blood hinted at the extent of damage June had managed to self-inflict. She groaned, her lips moving, searching for the strength to form words. “I couldn’t … stand it. They were all around me, trying to use me. Where’s Emmett?” She tried to call out to him, but his name miscarried in her throat.

“He’s not here right now,” Lawrence said.

“I’ll be with him soon?” she mouthed between wet breaths. “And Ty?”

“Who?”

“Their son,” Abigail said. “Yeah. Ty, too.”

“I wanna hear him laugh again.”

“You will, sweetie.” Abigail was crying, overcome by June’s deathbed desperation—wishful thinking and unanswerable questions begging answers, any semblance of truth be damned.

“He’s always been a little boy in my mind. You think he’s grown up into a—” She choked, then coughed, a mist of blood sputtering through the gaps between her teeth.

“Try not to talk,” Lawrence said.

“Will I still be his mom? I was for six beautiful …” She moaned, her eyes closing. Abigail placed her ear on June’s sternum, listening for the rise and fall of lungs expanding, deflating.

“I’m so sorry.” Lawrence wept. “This was my fault.”

June’s chest swelled, Abigail’s head lifting.

Then it fell—down, down—one long exhalation, all air expelled, and never rose again.

64

At three in the afternoon, Abigail heard Lawrence say, “There’s light up ahead.”

The two of them entered the largest cavern yet, more than a hundred feet across, filled with enormous spires that rose from the floor. A spring bubbled out of a crack in the wall, speleothem deposits hanging like curtains from the high ceiling. They stood in the luminous shaft that angled down, bathing them in daylight. Forty feet above, a chimney bored through the ceiling, and Abigail saw a distant patch of gray at the end of it.

“Never get there,” Lawrence said. “Don’t even get your hopes up.” He walked over to the spring. “Abigail, bring your empty water bottle.” She went to her father and dug the Nalgene bottle out of her pack. Lawrence held the plastic lip against the rock, and with the bottle halfway full, he strode into the middle of the cavern and held it up to the natural light.

The water was cloudy, sediment already settling on the bottom. He sniffed it. “Potent sulfur smell.” He sipped the water, winced, and spit it out. “Very mineralized. Tastes bitter and acidic. Much stronger than the hot springs in Pagosa. I don’t know if this is even safe to drink.” Abigail gazed up at the window in the ceiling, beating back the despair. This was far worse than traveling through the dark zone, she decided. This was throwing it in your face, a glimpse of the unreachable—heaven from hell.

• • •

When they finally stopped for the day, a smothering depression had descended on them. It was suppertime, but there would be nothing more to eat than a nibble from the last granola bar, a sip or two of water. They would sleep in their damp and filthy clothes, in the cold, on a hard rock floor, and when they awoke, it would still be dark.

Abigail and Lawrence sat against the wall in a small room with a low ceiling, a space that resembled fifty other rooms they’d passed through during the last fifteen hours.

“We shouldn’t have left her there,” Abigail said.

“What could we do? Dragging her through the cave with us won’t bring her or Emmett back, will it?” Lawrence switched off his headlamp.

Abigail, desperate to hear his voice, anything to break the uncompromising black-hole silence, said, “You’ve found the remains of Abandon and you now know how they died, but you still don’t really understand what happened, do you?”

“Nope. And Quinn—if that’s really his name—throws a new wrench into the equation.”

“But knowing they all died in this cave?”

“My gut tells me that, like us, they were locked in here. Maybe by Oatha Wallace and Billy McCabe. But the fact that the gold was locked in as well kind of refutes that theory.”

Sitting there in the dark, listening to him talk, Abigail felt shards of cold begin to prick her face, wondered if it might be the first sign of frostbite or hypothermia.

“Why do you think Quinn did this to us?” she said. “Any idea?”

“Beyond plain old greed? No. We should probably drink some water.”

Lawrence turned on his lamp, reached for the bottle. At first, Abigail mistook them for dust motes in the light beam, then realized these white things were actually snowflakes.

“Lawrence?” she said. “It’s snowing in here.”

He looked up. “Oh my God, I saw the chimney when we first came in, but it was already dark outside. I assumed it was just another blind shaft.” His headlamp spotlighted the hole in the ceiling, snow floating down through it, melting on the cave floor.

Abigail got up. “Lawrence, can you lift me up there?”

She straddled his shoulders and he stood slowly, his legs shuddering under the strain. “Scoot to the right. You’re crushing me into the ceiling.” Abigail peered up the narrow chimney, wondered how far to the surface, if it even stayed wide enough for her to get there. “Okay, let me down.” Lawrence bent his knees, eased back onto the floor. Abigail said, “I think I can climb up there if you lift me a little farther up the hole.”

“Well, I know I couldn’t do it even if my ankle wasn’t wrecked. And with no rope, only one of us can get out. How would you feel about going alone, trying to find help? I can draw a map on your notepad, get you back to the trailhead. You’d have to find the keys to Scott’s Suburban. I’m not sure if they’re with him or in his pack at the campsite.”

“And I’ll get my cell, try to call for help from the pass.”

Lawrence sighed, relief enveloping his face like the loosening of taut cables.

“You should get some sleep before you go, Abby. A few hours at least.”

• • •

The alarm on Abigail’s watch seemed to beep five seconds after she’d closed her eyes. She’d slept for four hours on the cold rock, dreamless and deep. She turned onto her side and faced Lawrence. His breath warmed her face, and in that virgin dark, she caught his scent—a repressed relic from those precious years when he was Daddy, and not the remnants of aftershave, no superficial mosaic of man-made chemicals, but his core, lifeblood odor, and it carried her back even further than the smell of cut grass and school-bus seats and sno cones.

“You awake?” he whispered.

“My alarm just went off. Guess it’s time. You weren’t asleep?”

“Been thinking.”

“What about?”

“Those gold bricks, the greedy people they’ve killed through the centuries, people they’re still killing. But you and the Tozers didn’t come into these mountains for greed. Emmett and June are dead because of me. You’re in this cave ’cause of me. And I’m sorry. Beyond words, I’m sorry. It won’t change a damn thing now, but I need to say it, need you to hear it. I know what a selfish no-good fuck I am. And what you said in the boarding-house? You were right, Abby. It’s all about me. Always has been.” He cupped her face in his gloved hands. “Take this with you,” he whispered. “If you make it back to me. If you don’t. My leaving … wasn’t your fault. Or your mother’s. I left because something inside of me was broken. Still is. I hurt people I love, who love me, and I don’t know why. But my little girl, my beautiful, perfect little girl, I’m so sorry I hurt you, so sorry you got me for a daddy.”

Abigail fought like hell against it—a realignment, the unraveling of an old stubborn knot.

• • •

With Abigail astride her father’s shoulders, she was still a foot shy of any usable handhold.

“I’m just not far enough up the chimney,” she said. “Push me higher.” As she lifted off Lawrence’s shoulders, her headlamp illuminated the closest jug, a few inches from her fingertips. “Almost there,” she said, reaching out and grabbing the jug with both hands. “Got it.”

Lawrence said, “Find a foothold.”

Abigail’s fingers had already begun to cramp, and her feet were scrambling for purchase.

“I can’t find anything. Oh God, I’m slipping! I can’t—”

“*Feel that?”* Lawrence yelled as he jammed the toe of her right boot into a crevice. “Let your weight rest on your feet now!” Abigail settled onto her legs. “Just take your time. Get your strength back up.” As she caught her breath, Abigail shone her headlamp up the chimney. It appeared to narrow farther up, but the handholds were plentiful. She cinched down the straps of her day pack, then reached over her head for the next handhold—a crack in the wall wide enough to slide her fist into.

She pulled herself up and moaned, the pain in her tailbone excruciating.

“Remember to climb with your feet,” Lawrence yelled up to her. “Otherwise, you’ll tire out.” She tested her weight on a big chockstone wedged in the chimney, decided to trust it, and made the next move, rested for thirty seconds, then made another. As long as she allowed her legs to bear the weight, her arms didn’t cramp. She climbed through a ten-foot section filled with bombproof buckets. Then the rock became wet, then icy, then snow-dusted. The handholds dwindling. Suddenly, she had nothing to grab.

“I’m stuck!” she yelled. “No handholds!”

“Chimney the rest of the way up!” His voice sounded distant, like he’d shouted up to her from the bottom of a well. “Push your feet against opposite walls. Hold yourself up with the pressure!”

She stood perched on a thin lip, half an inch wide, legs trembling with the onset of a paralyzing weakness. “I’m gonna fall!” she screamed.

“Listen to me! Take your right leg, dig it into the wall at your back, and keep the ball of your left foot pressed hard into the wall facing you!”

She tried it, the soles of her boots slipping on the rock. Pushed harder, pain radiating out from her tailbone so intensely, she felt it in her fillings and nearly fainted. She finally regained purchase and inched her way up

again, her boots jammed into the rock, taking handholds and footholds where she could find them, chimneying where she couldn't.

Snow poured down on her, and she heard the shriek of wind just above.

Abigail glanced down the chimney, Lawrence's headlamp just a pinpoint of light seventy feet below, thought of the night he left, all those years ago, her first concrete memory. And she wondered if, as her father watched her climb to the surface, leaving him stranded in the dark, it felt anything to him like it had to her the night she'd watched him walk out her bedroom door.

You marooned us in a deeper cave than this, and you never came back. How do you forgive that? You deserted a four-year-old girl whose world you made turn 'round. You made me feel worth leaving. How do I forgive that? If I don't come back, Daddy, no one will ever hear from you again.

Her head emerged into the blizzard as she scrambled out of the cave, nothing but a hole on a steep, snowy slope, rimmed by three feet of powder. She checked her watch—12:32 A.M. She'd been underground for twenty hours. Her fingers, arms, and legs were cramping, and she stood high on a mountain, wind howling, in pitch-black, whiteout conditions, with no idea where she was, or how to find Abandon.

1893

65

The next morning, they took the air, walking together down Main, the sky midwinter blue, the sun lifting over the east canyon wall and the unshaded snow already too brilliant to look at.

The fires had gone out in the mercantile and surrounding hillside cabins, so the air smelled cold and crisp, rinsed of woodsmoke.

Harriet looked up at Stephen, squinting, though the bonnet gave ample shade to her eyes. She thought it strange to be with this young preacher who treated her like a grown-up, asked her opinion of things. This had not been her experience with Daddy.

“Where did God take the people?” she asked, and not for the first time since last night.

When Stephen stopped and squatted down, his webs sank another foot in the snow. “Harriet,” he said. “I already told you I don’t—”

Something had moved above them. He glanced up at the second floor of the hotel, saw Molly Madsen standing in the bay window, staring down at them. He grimaced as the ulcer in his stomach flared.

They fought their way through deep drifts blown against the brick building, finally emerging into the lobby of the hotel.

“Go play at the billiard table, Harriet.”

Stephen removed his smoked specs and unlaced his webs, then climbed the stairs. In the dark hallway, he knocked on her door, and when she asked who was there, he replied, “Stephen Cole.”

The door opened. The preacher blushed. Though colder in her room than in the hall, Molly had clothed herself only in a sheer chemise. She stood shivering, breath steaming through corpse blue lips.

“When I saw you on the street, I thought you were my Jack. I’m expecting him any moment now.”

“May I come in? Build a fire for you?”

“Oh. Well. Yes, that would be fine.”

Stephen stepped inside, laid his felt hat on the desk as Molly shut the door after him. Her suite smelled like a night jar, though it wasn’t the filth that struck him as much as the loneliness. It had holed up in this room, over-spread the sad gingham walls, the chipped furniture, its wilting

occupant. He knew Molly's situation—the abandonment and humiliation that had festered and atrophied into madness. He'd visited before, but always from the hall. She'd never invited him in, and in truth, he'd been glad of it.

"The furnace is over here," she said, leading him to a potbellied stove across from the bed. "Mr. Packer has always provided assistance of this nature. He's a dear friend and business associate of my Jack, though he hasn't come around lately."

Stephen counted enough logs stacked against the wall to heat the room for a day, maybe two. He balled up several sheets of old newspaper so brittle, they flaked apart in his hands. With the fire going, he said, "Why don't you come sit over here?"

Molly knelt before the open stove, her eyes glazing as she watched the aspen logs blacken in the flames. Stephen grabbed the dusty quilt from her bed and draped it over her shoulders, then unbuttoned his coat, eased down beside her.

"Molly," he said, "the town's been vacated."

"Everyone left? Even Mr. Packer?"

"Him, too, and I'll soon be leaving, so I was hoping I might persuade you to come with me."

"What if Jack comes and I'm not here? If no one is here?"

"We'll send word to Jack the moment we reach Silverton. I'll even pay for the tele—"

"But that isn't how … I'm supposed to be sitting in the window, looking down on the street. And then I see him walking toward the hotel, and he sees me up here in the window, and he doffs his hat and I smile and he runs up the steps and down the hall and—"

She lost her breath.

"It's okay, Molly."

"I will be *here* when my Jack comes to Abandon."

"Who'll bring you food and water? Wood for the stove? Who—"

"Jack will see to these things. He is my husband, after all."

"*Molly," Stephen said, and the words tempted him:* You've been in Abandon ten years, this hotel for five, and you'll die in this room if you don't leave with me. You've got as much a chance of seeing Jack again as those sagebrushers did of making their fortune in this desperate town.

Instead, Stephen stood. “Would you excuse me for a moment?” He left the suite and hurried down the stairs toward the lobby and the clack of ivory balls. The child had made a game of rolling them, three at a time, into the table’s leather pockets.

• • •

The preacher slipped back into Molly’s suite, found her basking in the heat of the stove, staring into the smoldering pile of embers. The room now reeked of wood smoke, a great improvement.

He sat with her again, said, “I was hoping you’d tell me of Jack?”

Her face enlivened, and as she spoke, Molly veered into sanity, Stephen catching peeks of the woman she must have been.

She narrated their first meeting in San Francisco and the ball, their courtship, the first time he kissed her, and finally the wedding, straying into the smallest details of the clothing worn, food served, floral arrangements, guests in attendance, everything as clearly recalled as if the event had transpired that morning. Stephen marveled at how thoroughly she described her husband’s face, the tone of his voice, even the smell of him, so by the time she pulled out the crinkled albumen print of Jack, Stephen’s mind had already formed an excellent likeness of the man.

Someone knocked at the door. Molly rose from the warmed floorboards by the stove, crossed the room, and asked who was there.

“Harriet McCabe, ma’am.”

Molly opened the door, looked down at the little girl standing in the hall. “What do you want?”

Harriet’s eyes cut to Stephen, back to Molly. “There’s a man in the lobby asking for you.”

Please God, let her believe the lie she so loves.

Molly staggered back. “His name?”

“Jack Engler, ma’am.”

Molly flushed, glanced back at Stephen. He came to the door, said, “Harriet, I want you to go downstairs and tell Mr. Engler that Mrs. Engler will send for him momentarily. Hurry now.”

As Harriet ran down the hall, Stephen closed the door.

Molly glanced at her chemise, which was stained and threadbare, a pitiful garment. She whispered, “He can’t see me like this.”

Stephen went to the wardrobe, threw open the doors. The dresses and gowns hadn't been worn in years; all were mottled with gray dust.

Molly chose a corset, much too small, but Stephen fit her into it as well as he could manage, hooked the two bones in front, and laced up the back. "Which gown?" he said. "I happen to like this blue—"

"Jack detests blue." She detached a peach-colored evening gown with plentiful ruffles from its hanger.

"A lovely choice, Molly." He pulled it over her head, helped slide her arms into the sleeves. As he swept the dust off her shoulders, he felt as if he were dressing an oversize child.

Her hands shook.

Stephen steadied them, said, "Don't be afraid. Your husband is down in the lobby because he loves you. He's come back for you."

He sat Molly down at the dressing table. Her hair hadn't been brushed in a long while—thin, oily, so tangled that he hesitated to run bristles through it. So he picked up the silver brush and slid the smooth backside of it down the length of her coarse black tresses.

Molly's reflection in the cracked mirror sent back the rubble of a woman, and Stephen prayed she didn't see herself as he did, that God might cause a beautiful distortion of the image her eyes received.

While he pretended to brush her hair, he considered Jack, wondered where this man lived today, and if he ever thought of the woman he'd deserted, this mad, pathetic creature of obsession, wished Jack could see what he'd done to his bride.

"You're stunning," Stephen said.

"I don't have any rouge."

He pinched her cheeks. "There. You're perfect now."

As Molly beamed, Stephen glimpsed the dignity she'd once possessed. He went to the door, cracked it open, yelled, "Harriet! Mrs. Engler is ready to receive her husband!"

Stephen shut the door. Molly walked over, her chest billowing beneath the shabby gown.

She stood three feet back from the door, Stephen behind her.

They listened to the heavy footsteps thumping up the stairs.

Molly glanced back at Stephen, grinning with all the giddy joy of a new bride, thinking of the first day she'd arrived in advance of her husband, in

this fledgling camp called Hope.

And all the things she'd wanted to do, places she'd intended to see, children to bear, tore through her mind like an avalanche.

She'd waited so long.

Now he was coming down the hall, and Molly whispered "Oh Jack" as Stephen thumbed back the hammer, raised the revolver to the back of her head, and waited for the knock at the door.

66

In the evening, Stephen went for water, blessed with convenience in this regard, since the hillside behind his home boasted a spring. The cabin's previous occupant had raised a simple structure over the rock where the water surfaced, so it could be easily accessed in the winter months.

A lantern in one hand, an empty pail in the other, he webbed fifty feet up the trail, past the privy and toward the shed, the moon so bright that he could've left the lamp behind.

He stepped under the tin roof and traded the lantern for an ax that hung from a nail in the clapboard.

Ice had amassed around the lip of the flat rock where the water spilled over, and when he'd chipped it clear, he set the pail under the trickle and sat contentedly on a dry rock, blanketed, like all the others in this old tailings pile, with an orange flocculent mass.

He'd always assumed it was algae.

• • •

A solitary cabin glowed on the east slope above Abandon, though you couldn't see inside, since the windows weren't made of glass, but white cotton cloth soaked in tallow. It was a cramped, one-room, saddle-notched affair with a mud and stone chimney, a little porch out front, and a corrugated metal roof that stayed warm enough with a fire blazing underneath it to keep the snow from sticking. Inside and out, it was a spartan dwelling, severely lacking the touch of a woman.

Stephen pulled two enameled graniteware pots off the fire and hustled them over to the rustic table where Harriet sat waiting for supper. He eased down onto the deacon seat and lifted the top from the larger of the two pots.

Steam bellowed out. The slumgullion simmered.

He spooned a serving of stew into Harriet's bowl, then sliced her a piece of sourdough bread and lathered on several spoonfuls of wild raspberry preserves. One of his parishioners had left the bread and jar of jam on his doorstep Christmas morning. He dipped Harriet's tin cup into an earthen vessel he'd bought off a Navajo trader, filled her cup with water, then

poured himself some Arbuckle's from a spouted pot, allowing himself a sip of coffee before ladling the stew into his own bowl.

He blessed the meal. It needed prayer.

The stew was horrendous—so wanting of salt and spice that it held all the complexity of dirty water with chunks of gristly elk meat and potatoes and cabbage bobbing on the oily surface.

But his new guest slurped it down without prejudice and even asked for more.

After supper, Stephen prepared Harriet's bed on the mattress he'd taken from the McCabes' shack earlier in the afternoon.

For pajamas, Harriet wore her underclothes, Bessie's peignoir—too long and bunched up around her feet—and a pair of drafty socks sewn from flour sacks. Stephen made Harriet turn away while he slipped a flannel nightshirt over his union suit.

"Would you like a story before we go to sleep?" he asked.

Harriet stood at the foot of his aspen bedstead, looking at the old newspaper that served as wallpaper, tacked to the logs.

"What would that be like?"

"You've never had a bedtime story read to you?"

She shook her head, and Stephen realized it owed to her parents' illiteracy. He got up from his mattress—just a bunch of burlap stitched together and stuffed with pine boughs—and walked over to the railroad tie mounted to the stone above the fireplace, the shelf serving as mantel and bookshelf.

He chose a scuffed, well-used volume, called Harriet over to her bed before the hearth, and tucked her in under the quilts. She lay between Stephen's legs with her head in his lap, and he read for ten minutes by firelight from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.*

He closed the book when he thought she'd fallen asleep, but as he tried to extricate himself without waking her, Harriet's eyes fluttered open and she said, "What happened to Miss Madsen?"

Stephen touched the back of his hand to the young girl's face. It was soft and cool. He gently wound one of her pitch-black ringlets around his finger. "Molly was very sick," he said.

"Like scarlet fever?"

"No, in her head. God told me to end her suffering, so I did."

“How did you?”

“Do you know how a gun works?”

“They hurt you.”

“They can. I shot a bullet into the back of Molly’s head so she wouldn’t be sick or sad anymore.”

“Did it hurt her?”

“It killed her body, but her soul never felt a thing.”

“You gonna shoot me in my head so I go to Jesus?”

“No, Harriet. You’ve got a long and happy life ahead of you.”

She closed her eyes.

Stephen ran his fingers through her hair until she fell asleep.

• • •

Harriet awoke. The fire was dying, and though her feet were cold, she could still feel the warmth of the flames on her face. The sound that had roused her from the dream came again. She sat up on the lumpy mattress, looked over her shoulder at Mr. Cole’s bed in the corner against the wall. The preacher had buried his face into his pillow, and he made strange, sad sounds.

Harriet took her doll and got up from the mattress and walked over to his bedside. “Hey,” she said.

Mr. Cole lifted his head off the pillow. Even in the low light of the cabin, she could see the wetness on his face, knew what it was.

“What are you doing up?”

“I heard you bein sad. Is the wet because everyone’s gone?”

Stephen wiped his eyes and sat up against the wall, his long legs hanging off the bed, feet touching the freezing dirt floor.

Harriet climbed onto the mattress with him.

“I’m sad for a lot of reasons.”

“Like what reasons?”

“Well, mainly because God told me to do a very hard thing, something I didn’t think He was capable of. Or me, for that matter. But I did it, because we have to obey God. Always. And now, I um …” He wept again. “I feel like I don’t know Him anymore. Like He isn’t who I thought He was. And that’s fine. He’s perfect, whatever He is. That’s my failure, to make naïve assumptions about His nature.

“Then the devil constantly tells me these lies, whispers in my ear that maybe it wasn’t God who spoke to me. That it was actually him, the evil one. Or that this horrible winter, this town, the thin air, the greed—all that took my mind from me.”

Harriet pried open the fingers of his right hand. “What’s that?”

In Stephen’s sweaty palm lay an ornate sterling silver hairpin. He let Harriet hold it. “It’s a hairpin,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“A piece of jewelry a woman uses to hold up her hair.”

“Why you got one?”

He smiled. “Fair question. It belonged to a woman named Eleanor.”

“Was she your wife?”

“No.”

“Is she dead?”

“No, Eleanor isn’t dead. You know, you kind of favor her. She had black curls like yours. Dark eyes.”

“Did she give you this?”

“We were picnicking on the beach late one afternoon. This was ten years ago, second-worst day of my life. I had taken her there to tell her I couldn’t marry her.”

“Why?”

“Because God told me to go to divinity school instead. To spend my life serving Him. It was a windy day and the wind kept blowing her hair loose, so she pulled out her two hairpins and stuck them in the sand. I swiped one when she wasn’t looking. I suppose I shouldn’t have. You know how you hold Samantha at night, and she makes you feel better? Safer?”

The child nodded.

“That hairpin is my Samantha. When I hold it, on hard nights, lonely nights like this, it makes me remember things about Eleanor—her eyes, the way she smelled, the sound of her laugh. And it makes me sad, makes me miss her, but it also reminds me that I was a very happy man once.”

“You wish you stayed on the beach with Eleanor?”

Stephen gathered his hair and tied it up in a ponytail.

“No, Harriet, I don’t wish that, because that would be wanting something in conflict with God’s will. But I’ll tell you what I do wish. Wish we could live twice, take a different path each time. That at the end of all this, when I

finished serving God in the West, I could go back to that day on the beach, put a ring on Eleanor's finger instead."

"Maybe you can still go back."

"Eleanor's married to a lawyer named Benjamin. They live in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with four children, last I heard."

Stephen lay back on his side, his head on the pillow, watching fire shadows move like black ghosts along the walls of his wretched cabin. He managed to cry softly this time, Harriet patting his back, telling him with the simplistic, heartfelt wisdom of a six-year-old that he would wake up in the morning feeling brand-new and happy again, how sometimes her daddy made her very sad and lonely and afraid, but that the feeling always passed, and that it would be the same way for him.

They slept in Stephen's bed and neither woke until just before dawn, and only because the fire had gone out, turned the cabin cold.

67

Lana Hartman had gone without food and water for two full days. She lay against the cold rock floor, watching the sole light source burn in the middle of the cavern—a miner's friend too weak to reach the gaunt and hollowed faces that lined the walls.

That first night locked in the mountain, the noise had been maddening—miners trying to beat the door down, quarreling, guns firing, children wailing. But most of the miners had left in search of water, and with the cavern quieted down, she now strained to hear the hushed voices—crying, prayers for deliverance, some praising God, others cursing Him, a pair of longhairs debating philosophy, theories concerning the soul after death.

Lana closed her eyes.

Sleep came in intermittent bursts of nightmare and fever dream. When she awoke, the thunder in her head had increased twofold, and Joss Maddox knelt beside her, stroking her hair. It took her a moment to latch onto Joss's voice.

"… the worst of it. Wish Cole hadn't met with a skull cracker. Love to hear him defend the behavior of his lovin God. He cares so much for us, this is one antigodlin fuckin way a showin it. You're hurtin, and you ain't done shit to deserve this hard fuckin deal. If I could do somethin for you, Lana, swear to holy Christ I would.

"I come to ask if you'd go with me. I'm leavin this fuckin tomb, goin on into the cave, see if I can't find water, some way out."

Lana cut her eyes at Joss, the barkeep's face distended and malformed in the lantern light.

"That a nod?"

Lana moved her head again.

"All right. Here, let me help you up. Hope you ain't too weak to walk, 'cause I'm too damn weak to carry you."

• • •

Joss lifted the shadowgee she'd stashed with Al's body, lighted the candle, and set out with Lana into the cave. They progressed slowly, guided by candlelight, soon leaving the man-made tunnels and passing into karst

terrain, traveling from room to room, Joss holding the shadowgee at head level to avoid walking into stalactites.

An hour out from the main cavern, they entered a small grotto. Water seethed out of the floor into a rimstone pool, and Lana ran to it, already on her knees and bringing a cupped handful to her mouth.

“Think you might regret that.”

Lana stared down at the spring, tiny bubbles streaming up from cracks in the bottom, the surface appearing to boil. She touched her tongue to it, the water bitter and caustic, heavily alkalied.

“Poisoned them, don’t you bet?”

Still, Lana almost drank it.

She watched the water slip through her fingers as Joss swiped extra candles from the two dead miners.

• • •

The hall echoed with the noise of the waterfall, the light too gentle to show its vast dimensions. They stood on the shore of a subterranean lake, its bed of white crystals shining under the rays of firelight that shot out through the perforated can.

The shadowgee clanged against the rock, and the women fell to their knees, bent down, put their faces into the water. Lana coughed up the first two swallows, but when she finally got some down, it was so cold and good, it made her head ache.

They sat on the bank, drinking until their stomachs bulged and Joss had to loosen the button on her canvas trousers.

She said, “Lana, you don’t wanna know what I’d do to have one cigarette left in my dream book and some Mexican common doins—few hot rocks, menudo, bottle a mescal. Keep thinkin I hear someone bangin the angle iron. Tell you what—I’d swear off whiskey for a meal.”

• • •

They wandered on inside the mountain, nothing but rock and shadows and firelight, Lana feeling certain that days must be passing for all their time in this underworld.

She was halfway through one of Haydn’s concertos when Joss stopped,

turned around, and said, “I think we better try to go back.” The way her voice carried, Lana pictured them standing in a large cavern. “I don’t have clue fuckin one as to our coordinates, but maybe Stephen came back after all or they got the door open. Hate for us to miss that blowout.”

Lana shook her head.

“What?”

She reached down, touched her feet, grimaced.

“Oh, you’re tired? Well, hell, I am, too. Maybe we should catch forty winks first. Let’s find a decent spot.”

They went a little ways farther, until they found a room where the rock was level.

“Your suite, Miss Hartman,” Joss said. “Hope you find everthin to your likin. Here, we have some rock. Over here, some more rock. Oh, and here’s some more fuckin rock. I hope you like rock.”

Lana smiled.

“Ain’t seen many a those.”

68

The two women lay on the rock, nestled together for warmth and blanketed under Lana's woolen cape and Joss's serape. Lana's headache had eased since she'd filled her stomach with water, but the reprieve of pain only made room for the deep hunger.

Joss said, "We got three candles left. Hope that'll get us somewhere better'n this. I'm blowin us out for a while."

Lana heard a puff and the room went black.

It was perfectly silent, cold.

She felt Joss take hold of her hand.

"Believe this shit? I don't. Guess it beats turnin into a cottonwood blossom, bag over my head, rope around my neck, squirmin before a bunch a damn strangers. You warm enough? Squeeze my hand if you are."

Lana squeezed.

"Good." They were quiet for a while, Lana wondering if sleep would come more easily in the absence of psychotic thirst.

"You always been a mute? Squeeze once for yes, twice for no, three times for shut the fuck up, Joss."

Two squeezes.

"Just curious is all. Take no offense. You spoke recently? Like in your adult life?"

One squeeze.

"How long since you went quiet?"

Three soft squeezes.

"Three years?"

One squeeze.

"That sound you hear is the wheels turnin inside my head, wonderin what the fuck happened to you. Was you met upon by some horrific occurrence?"

One squeeze.

"Somebody hurt you three years ago."

One squeeze.

"A man?"

Squeeze.

"Cocksuckers, all. Was you a whore?"

Two squeezes.

“This the work a your husband or—”

One squeeze.

“Lemme venture a guess… . He caught you steppin out?”

“Two squeezes.”

“Well, as our mode a communication would take about four fuckin centuries to unriddle this mystery, I’ll leave it at this. You’re a sweet human bein and for whatever reason you caught a rough shake, and I’m real sorry and I wish it hadn’t …”

The ceiling glowed, both women gasping as the moon edged into view, nearly full and faintly yellowed, the color of ancient paper, their rocky prison shellacked with placid light.

“I shit you not, this is the first piece a luck I ever had.”

The moon’s brief framing in the chimney window ended, and it shrank away, continuing along its predestined path across the sky, stranding them once more in darkness.

• • •

Joss held the shadowgee above their heads and stared at the ceiling.

“You lift me, I believe I can scramble up that. Squat down.”

Lana knelt and Joss straddled her shoulders.

“All right, raise me up slow like.”

Lana stood, surprised by how light Joss was—barely a hundred pounds—and the weight soon lifted off her shoulders.

Joss began to climb, holding the shadowgee in her teeth, clawing her way up the rock, the candlelight dwindling.

Lana glanced around at the darkness on all sides.

“Fuck!” Joss had stopped, perched fifteen feet up the chimney, muttering to herself. Then she was moving again, but coming back down, the room rewarming with candlelight.

Her legs dangled through the bottom of the chimney.

She dropped to the floor, took the shadowgee out of her mouth, said, “Look here, Lana. Only one of us can go up. I want you to.”

Lana shook her head.

“No? Wanna know what you got in store if you stay here? Whoever climbs up that chimney’s gotta have the shadowgee to see, ’cause you can’t

hold no candle in your teeth. I'll leave you with three candles and two matches. No matter what happens, I'd say it's a long chance I ever make it back to this room, which means you gotta find the mine again, where everyone else is at. Your candle has the luxury a blowin out twice. After that, you might as well sit down and wait to die, in darkness and quiet like you never seen, and all alone, just you and your thoughts. Me? I'd much prefer to take my chances with whatever's on the bright end a this hole."

Lana shook her head, her chin twitching.

"I ain't lockin horns with you on this. You know enough about me to know I operate on the smoky end a the spectrum, so this ain't no easy offer to make. I would suggest you take me up on it 'fore the notcher in me rethinks the situation."

Lana pointed at Joss and turned her hands over, palms up.

"Don't worry about it. I've always survived. I'll get myself out a this, jam the breeze back to everyone else. Look, I done plenty a awful things, and not many of 'em ever keep me up nights, but leavin you here in the dark ain't somethin I care to haul around in my head, pokin at what few shreds a conscience I still possess. Savvy?"

She handed Lana the shadowgee and tied up her wavy black hair.

"Now I'm squattin down now, and I better feel your fuckin heft on my shoulders."

2009

69

It was more snow than Abigail had seen in her lifetime—waist-deep and still dumping. With the headlamp on, her visibility ended after ten feet. Without it, the world lay as dark as the cave she'd crawled out of.

Her options whittled to climb or go down, she chose to descend, and between the twelve-thousand-foot oxygen-deprived air and the energy it took to walk without snowshoes in a meter of powder, she had to stop every few steps to catch her breath.

The slope steepened.

A gust of wind knocked her down.

Twice, she banged her knees into blades of rock hidden beneath the snow.

A half hour out from the cave, the slope terminated at a cliff. Abigail knelt down, shone her lamp over the edge, her stomach knotting as she watched the flakes spiral into darkness. She had no idea how far it dropped, but she resolved that no way in hell would she be going that way.

Instead, she traversed a descending line along the edge of the precipice, her face going numb again, fingers freezing, light-headed from the elevation and the lack of food and water.

Soon she'd left the cliff behind, working her way down a small drainage filled with the murmur of a creek in the twilight of its season, trickling under the snowpack on its path to wider waters. She spied tall, slim profiles in the gloom below. She passed through alpine shrubland, winter-crippled timberline trees, then finally emerged into a forest proper.

The firs drooped under their loads of powder.

A branch caught her hood, snow raining down her neck. She ducked under a canopy of Douglas fir branches that dipped low enough to provide some semblance of shelter.

She pulled off her gloves, dug the ice out of her collar. It was so quiet in the forest, with only the creak of straining fir trees and clumps of snow sliding off branches. She was very thirsty, but she'd refused to take any water or supplies from Lawrence, recalled telling him she'd just eat snow. She scooped a handful into her mouth. Chewed the ice. Squeezed out several drops of water, then spit it out. Her head ached. She'd been cold. Now she was colder.

A howl erupted nearby. It rose slowly and faded slowly, with all the heart-sickness of an elegy. She'd never heard that sound in the wild, and while it tripped all the primal fear triggers in her hard-wiring, she still found it lyrical and haunting and deeply sad.

It rose up again, closer now, and from someplace high above, perhaps that shrouded peak she'd descended, a collection of howls answered, their voices sweeping in a lonely cascade down through the forest. Abigail glimpsed something bounding through powder.

The wolf stopped thirty feet away, buried to its neck, ears flattened, hackles spiked, regarding her with its head cocked, as if in wonderment that a human had ventured out on such a night, eyes glinting in points of yellow fire, long incisors shining as it bared its teeth.

Abigail blinked and it was gone.

She got up, pushed on through the forest. After awhile, her watch beeped —3:00 A.M. She realized she'd been traveling downhill for some time, and that worried her. Abandon stood at tree line, but she'd gone well below it now, by as much as a thousand feet.

She turned back and ascended through the forest, taking the steepest line she could find, back up into deeper snow, thinning trees, using saplings to haul herself upslope.

Just before dawn, she passed through an odorless stand of trees stripped to their trunks—an ossuary of burned evergreens, this barkless, coneless, leafless, blackened wood mass-murdered some time ago by an electrical storm.

At timberline, she stopped to rest, beyond exhaustion, legs cramping, nauseated with hunger. She'd sweated out all her water and she made herself choke down a few handfuls of snow as the sky shifted from black into gray—the first progression toward dawn.

She sat shivering against a crooked, twisting runt of a tree, watching the gathering light shape out the wilderness around her. Snow came in spits now, and though the wind had slacked off in the forest, she could hear it moaning through the crags above.

Dawn dropped anchor.

She'd hoped to see the only landmark she knew—those jagged granite teeth of the Sawblade—but the cloud deck had decapitated everything above twelve thousand feet.

Then she saw it, a ways up the nearest slope—the tiny cross of Abandon's church puncturing the low gray clouds. She stood. The town itself lay just a quarter of a mile ahead. She could already see the other structures, and a tinge of pride coursed through her.

I found it in the dark, in the middle of a blizzard. Not bad for a city girl.

The possibility that Quinn was still out there flashed through her mind. She turned off her headlamp and waded on into the box canyon.

70

Main Street lay empty, nineteenth-century wind chimes tinkling discordantly in the doorway of what had been the mercantile. Abigail stood between the saloon and the hotel, looking up at the bay window, that vantage point from which she'd first seen Isaiah or Stu through the red filter of Emmett's camera.

She studied the snow in the vicinity. With their tracks from Monday night now a day and a half old, there should've been no trace of them under four feet of snow. And yet she saw tracks, at least one fresh set, that moved into the hotel, then south toward the pass.

Abigail waded over to the entrance, stepped through the door frame. She banged her boots against the brick and knocked off the ice, then turned on the headlamp and swept it over the collapsed staircase, the archways, the front desk. Her last time in this hotel lobby, late Monday night, Scott Sawyer had been lying under the lounge's archway. Now the only sign of him was a dark stain on the floorboards.

She made a cursory inspection of the lounge, glancing under the billiard table, behind the fallen elk head, wondering if Quinn had found Scott, stowed him elsewhere.

If Scott had brought the keys to his Suburban with him on their Monday-night photo shoot, she could forget using his truck. It was seventeen miles from Abandon to the trailhead, another ten from the trailhead to Silverton. Twenty-seven miles. Farther than a marathon, in deep snow, at altitude, sleep-divested, and without food or water.

If my cell doesn't get service at the pass, that's what I'm in for. Might as well get going.

She heard a boot step on broken glass—across the lobby, in the dining room.

She rushed toward the doorway as a shadow darted out from behind the bar, footsteps coming after her, crunching over the shattered chandeliers, her heart slamming in her chest like a thing that wanted free. Before she reached the entrance, something grabbed her left arm and a gloved hand squelched her scream, dragging her back from the doorway, pushing her down behind the front desk.

Her headlamp illuminated Scott's face. "Scott? Oh my God, you're a—"

"Shhh. Someone was here just fifteen minutes ago."

"Who?"

"Didn't recognize them. I heard footsteps in the snow, so I hid behind the bar."

"How are you alive?" He raised his down vest, yellow fleece jacket, and thermal underwear top so Abigail could see where he'd duct-taped the knife wound closed to stop the bleeding, the right half of his abdomen bloated and inflamed.

"It hurts like hell, and I thought I was dead when they first stuck me. The blade nicked a rib, but it missed my vital organs. I faked it once those men in masks showed up. Hoped if they thought I was dying, maybe they'd just leave me tied up, which is exactly what they did. I came to consciousness last night, managed to free myself. I've been resting, gathering my strength to go out and look for everyone."

Well, they're all dead because of you and my father, *she thought.*

Abigail leaned back against the desk, could have fallen asleep inside of a minute.

"The three masked men?" she said. "Ex-Special Forces."

"Three? I thought there were only two."

"Your trustworthy assistant was the third."

"*What?"* Scott ripped off his headband, ran his fingers through his bleached-out hair.

"Apparently, Jerrod found out the real reason you and Lawrence had come to Abandon."

If he caught the edge in her voice, Scott didn't show it, just said, "So what happened?"

She told him everything except that they'd actually found the gold, and when she finished, Scott put his head between his knees and sat absolutely still and silent, though by the light of her headlamp, Abigail saw tears splattering on the floorboards under his face.

"I killed them," he said.

She put her hand on the back of his neck. "No, you—"

"No, I was their guide. They just came out here to see Abandon, take some stupid fucking pictures, and we used them for their backcountry permit. Jesus Christ."

“Scott, I know you’re upset, but we have to go for help right now. Lawrence won’t last long in that cave when the water runs out. Now, my cell’s in my pack back at camp. If I get service at the pass, hopefully we can get somebody out here.”

Scott looked up and wiped his face. He stood, limped off into the dining room, returned with his pack. He handed Abigail two Clif Bars and a Nalgene bottle. “The water’s got two packs of Emer’gen-C in it. Get that in you. It’ll help replenish the minerals and vitamins you’ve lost. You’ll need a serious energy boost for what’s ahead of us.”

71

They struck out south toward their campsite, choosing a route behind the buildings in an effort to remain unseen. Despite his wound, Scott moved quickly through the snow, and soon they'd left behind the row of false-fronted cribs at the end of town.

Up-canyon, Abigail spotted the boulder standing on the outskirts of camp. "I recognize that rock," she said. "The tents are just beyond it."

As they passed the boulder, Scott said, "Where's our stuff?"

He went out ahead of her, moving in frantic circles through the area where the tents had been. "I'm not believing this," he said as he dug in the snow. "Quinn must've taken our gear. Everything's gone. Even Gunter and Gerald."

"Who?"

"The llamas. Fucker better be packing a fucking arsenal if he touched my boys."

"You're sure the tents aren't just buried? The snow would've covered them, right?"

"See this?" Scott knocked the powder off the top of a pyramid-shaped boulder that barely jutted out of the snow. "Lawrence put his tent up right here, by this rock, so he could lay his things on it. Now all his stuff's gone. But cross your fingers and your toes." Scott waded over to another boulder, this one capped with four feet of snow. "I never set my tent up Monday night," he said. "I was too busy fixing supper, helping everyone else get settled into camp. I was gonna do it when we got back from photographing the ghost town. What I'm hoping is that by the time Quinn found our camp, enough snow had fallen to bury my big pack, which I left beside this boulder."

Scott ducked under the snow. A moment later, he popped up, hoisting his internal-frame Dana Design backpack like a trophy above his head.

Abigail worked her way over to him. "What do you have in there?"

"Everything. My tent. Extra clothes. First-aid kit. Sleeping bag. More bottles of water. A gas stove. Food. I don't think we'd have made it without this." He brushed the snow off his solid-black pack and loosened the compression straps.

“Please tell me you have a cell phone.”

“Hate the fuckers.”

“So we’re hiking out.”

“Seventeen beautiful miles.” He dropped a big compression bag in the snow. “But no worries. I’ll whip us up a meal before we go.” He reached into the bag, emerged with two packets of Backpacker’s Pantry freeze-dried dinners. “What’s your pleasure? Paella with saffron rice and chicken, or turkey Stroganoff?”

• • •

Within the hour, they were on the move again, heading toward the Sawblade, swaddled in ashen clouds.

After a half mile, Quinn’s tracks branched off from the canyon and climbed the slope toward Emerald Basin.

They pushed on, taking turns breaking a trail through the deepening powder.

By the time they reached the ruins of the Godsend, the drifts came to Abigail’s chest.

“Let’s take a breather,” Scott said. They collapsed near the stamp mill at the foot of that steep white slope that swept up two thousand feet into the clouds.

“What happens if Quinn sees our tracks?” Abigail asked.

“Yeah, I’ve been worried about that.”

“I mean, he will eventually see them, right?”

“Probably. And you’re exhausted. I’m hurting. He won’t have to travel that fast to catch us, and he has one hell of an interest in our never leaving these mountains. I’d feel a lot better if it was snowing like a bastard. We’re target practice out here in the open.”

“You got a gun in your pack?”

“Jerrod kept the pistol with him.”

Abigail squinted down-canyon, subconsciously searching for a tiny figure plodding toward them through the snow. “I’ll bet Quinn has a gun,” she said.

“What we have to do is get as much of a head start as we possibly can. I was listening to my weather radio in the hotel last night, and it sounds like it only snowed above eighty-five hundred feet. If we can get down that far,

we should be safe. He won't be able to track us. But as long as we stay in the snow, it's just a matter of time."

Abigail struggled to her feet, gave Scott a hand up. "Then let's get going," she said. "I'll lead for a while."

1893

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She used her thumb to pull the hammer back.

“Good. Now put your finger right here.” He eased it onto the trigger. “No, don’t squeeze yet. Not until you’re ready to shoot something.”

“I’m ready.”

“What are you aiming at?”

“Our cabin.”

The hammer snapped down on an empty chamber.

“Okay, now what if you wanna shoot it again?”

She worked the big hammer back.

“Perfect.”

“This time, I’m shootin the chimney.”

Snap.

“I think you’ve got it.”

She heard harness bells ringing a couple hundred feet below, the burros growing antsy. The preacher took the gun from her and broke it open, dropped shiny cartridges into the chambers.

“This becomes dangerous now,” Stephen said. “It’ll be loud.”

“Why you cryin?”

He gave her the gun, took a wipe from his frock coat, and dabbed his eyes. “Don’t draw the hammer back ’til you’re ready to shoot it.”

Peering through snow-clad branches, she saw the mule skinner emerge from an empty cabin across the canyon.

“See him?” Stephen asked.

“That man’s sold his saddle like Miss Madsen?”

“He’s even more sick in the head. You wanna help him, don’t you? Send him up to God with everyone else?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You keep the gun inside your cloak until you get close. I don’t want you trying to shoot him until he’s as near to you as that fir tree.”

“Will it hurt him?”

“No. Like Molly, he’s already in great pain. You’re making it go away. After the first shot, he’ll fall down. You be real careful, and you pull that hammer back again, and you walk up to him and shoot him in the head.”

The sick mule skinner shouted, “Anyone here?”—his voice so faint and lonesome, rising like a prayer from the canyon floor.

“I don’t wanna.”

“I know, but it’s time.”

“I’m scared.”

“Nothing to be scared of, Harriet.”

“You do it.” She handed him the gun, but he shoved it back.

“God told me this chore falls to you, that you’re His little angel of darkness, and He allowed me to save you for this very purpose. Do you see the perfection of His grand design? Please, Harriet. Go end that poor man’s suffering.”

“If I do good, you’ll dope me with a sinker and some raspberry jam?”

“I promise.”

“Mr. Cole, is God gonna give me new ones?”

“New what, honey?”

“Daddy and Mama.”

Stephen stared down into Harriet’s dark eyes. “I’ll be caring for you.”

“Bethany’s daddy was the best I ever saw. She called him Papa.”

Stephen blushed. “Well, I suppose that would probably be all right if you wanted to um … you know … call me that.”

Harriet smiled. “Okay, Papa.”

• • •

The little girl pushed through the trees and stepped out from the motte of firs. He watched her through the branches, webbing downhill, hands concealed in her cloak, just like he’d told her.

He looked over Abandon—the empty, smokeless cabins, the cribs, silent dance hall, his dark chapel on the opposite slope—and he couldn’t stop the thoughts, remembering that first day he’d arrived here by stage, the town pure energy and motion, the new-sawn yellow boards of the buildings and the smell of fresh-cut wood, streets a soup of mud and shit and garbage, crowded with horses, buggies, pack trains, sidewalks jammed with miners, packers, whores, gamblers, con men, everyone trying to fill their wallets, eyes electric with a peculiar mix of misery, lust, and manic greed.

Who are you?

Stephen Cole.

No, who *are* you?
God’s
No, *Faithful*
you murdered
servant.
an entire town.
A gunshot rolled through the canyon.

Thinking, I am Your faithful servant I am Your faithful servant l am Your faithful servant l am Your faithful servant l am Your faithful servant l am faithful faithful faithful

His head fractured with molten pain, and he fell unconscious before the second shot rang out.

73

It was a twenty-one burro pack train, the first six animals loaded down with burlap sacks holding three quarters of a ton of Packer's gold, the next fifteen bearing stiff riders, all fastened to their mounts with one long mecate —Ezekiel Curtice, skin a plum shade of scarlet, burned from the cold and high-altitude sun, frozen straight through, an eviscerated Bart Packer, his four servants, Russell Ilg, Molly Madsen, the albumen print of her husband shoved down the front of her corset, Billy McCabe, a faceless Oatha Wallace, the still-warm mule skinner; and the four other men the preacher had murdered in the day hole on Christmas night.

It was dusk, the snow falling in big, patient flakes.

The preacher sipped from the tincture of arnica and prayed for the fifth time in the last hour that God might ease the awful pain in his head.

From his vantage, he could see the soft glow of his cabin across the canyon, where Harriet slept.

He slapped the rear haunches of the last burro. The animal brayed, and the pack train shuffled on into the mine.

• • •

Stephen dropped the shadowgees on the floor of the tunnel and pulled the key out of his pocket.

As he worked it into the padlock, the hair on his neck stood erect. *It's been three days,* he thought. *They must be dead by now.* He dropped the crossbar on the rock, lifted the lever, the bolt retracting, pushed the iron door open with the toe of his arctic.

When the noise of the rusty hinges died away, he listened.

Silence.

He knelt and lighted the rest of the shadowgees, carried them inside three at a time, setting the lamps on the rock around the door. Then he walked back up the tunnel to the end of the pack train and quirted them on.

The donkeys hesitated, reluctant to enter the mine. He slapped their bony rumps with the reata's braided rawhide. "Get on, now!"

They inched forward, carrying their cargo, the tunnel resonant with the clack of hooves on rock.

He drove the burros through the iron door and followed them into the mine. They bunched up near the entrance, huddled together and braying nervously.

Stephen went to work cutting loose the burlap sacks and hauling the gold bricks into a nearby alcove. Then he severed the horsehair rope that attached the dead to the burros and shooed the pack train out of the mine and back up the day hole. *It is finished.*

"There!" he shouted into the cavern. "All yours! For all time!"

He reached down to lift a shadowgee.

Fingers touched his arctic.

He shrieked, tripped, and fell as he moved for the door.

What crawled toward him in the firelight seemed neither man or woman, and barely human. Lipless and toothless, a dried-out shell of a person, it whispered words undecipherable, its inflated tongue lolling out of its mouth like a piece of jerky.

Stephen raised the lamp, and in that trembling firelight, he saw the throng of Abandon in the cavern, most dead, a dozen or so dragging themselves in his direction, beggars searching for crumbs of light. The one who'd touched his boot reached out for him, bulging, lidless eyes desperate for an end to their living death. Stephen wept as he backed into the tunnel and pulled the door shut.

He stood there for a moment, listening to a weak fist pound the iron on the other side.

Please, God, end their suffering. How does that glorify—

It stopped him mid-prayer—framed in that oval of charcoal light at the far end of the tunnel, a silhouette too tall to be a child.

74

Main Street lay empty, wind chimes gossiping in the doorway of the mercantile, where Lana barged inside, unsheathed Joss's bowie, and stabbed the blade into the first sack she could get her hands on.

The burlap split.

Flour poured onto the board floor.

She brought a cupped handful to her mouth, and despite the feeling that she was yamping from Jessup, the merc's owner, nothing had ever tasted better.

On her third mouthful, she spotted the jar of elk jerky sitting on the counter, made a break for it, using the knife to carve bite-size pieces, devouring five strips before her stomach offered the first rumble of satisfaction.

• • •

Lana stared at the fresh set of tracks through town, which looked too orderly to have been left by a herd of passing deer. She stood listening for any sound beyond the scrape of snowflakes collecting on her cape, cold and sore, having hiked all day since climbing out of the cave, through zero visibility and ungodly deep snow, just to make it back to Abandon.

She gazed up the east slope, searching for the mine where they'd all taken shelter Christmas night. What she saw instead, obscured by the falling snow, were figures near the rimrock.

Heathens.

She squinted, but instead of hostiles, her eyes sharpened the features of three burros bearing their riders into the mountain.

She post-holed north up Main, the snow coming to her waist, her feet mercifully going numb again, panting when she finally reached the chapel.

By the time she arrived at the base of the rimrock, the burros had disappeared into the mountain, the canyon fading toward a night she would never survive without roof and walls and fire.

When she caught her wind, she fought her way up the last of the burro trail, finally standing just inside the opening to the mine.

This warm passage smelled of trail-worn animals.

She heard water dripping.

Harness bells.

The clap of metal into rock.

Her eyes discerned movement in the dark, something coming toward her up the passage, and she'd started to retreat when the first burro moved by, out of the mine, back down the slope toward Abandon.

It took a minute for the pack train to depart the mine, and as the last burro ambled past, a man shrieked from someplace deep inside the mountain.

Lana ventured three steps into the mine.

A speck of firelight flickered a ways down the tunnel and a door slammed shut.

Someone knocked on it.

Someone wept and whispered and then abruptly hushed.

Water dripped.

Metal clanged into metal.

Outside, the jingle of harness bells dwindled.

"*Are you real?"* A man's voice, thick with tears, and something familiar about it—a refinement, the subtlest drawl.

Then footsteps pounded up the tunnel again, and not a hooved animal, but the softer squeak of boots on wet rock. Lana began backpedaling toward the opening, glancing over her shoulder into the snowstorm and the blue dusk.

"No, don't be afraid."

The footsteps coming faster now.

She knew this voice.

The preacher, Stephen Cole, emerged from the shadows, geed up, utterly wasted, gray-skinned, eyes bloodshot and black-ringed, hair unwashed, more like a creature sprung from the innards of the mountain than Abandon's spiritual compass.

"Miss Hartman, what are you doing out here?" He'd stopped just a few feet away, both of them close enough to the opening to be stung with the razor cold of stray snowflakes. "Weren't you in the mine with everyone else Christmas night?"

Lana nodded.

"A band of heathens rode through town just a couple hours ago. They're on the peck. Nearly raised my scalp. Everyone's still in the mine. I've been

bringing food and water, extra candles. Packer's gold's in there, too. That's what all the burros were carrying."

It suddenly clicked. Stephen had hidden in Abandon since Christmas night, eluding the heathens, waiting for an opportunity to bring provisions to those who had holed up in the mountain. She felt a shot of relief and admiration, hoped Joss had made it back to everyone else in the main cavern.

"Come with me. We're not safe out here, particularly with night coming on."

Lana looked once more down into Abandon, nothing to see but snow and darkness and—

A single grain of light burned on the other side of the canyon—a firelit cabin.

When she turned back, the preacher had lit a shadowgee, and he stared intently into her eyes, offering his hand.

"Don't be ringey. You need to come with me right now."

She didn't take his hand, but she did walk beside him into the passage, and as they went on, candlelight glinting on the slickensides of the day hole, a strange thing happened. Her mouth ran dry and her heart raced, and as rays of firelight reached the iron door at the tunnel's end, she realized what it was—the preacher's eyes, his voice. *You need to come with me right now.* A predatory insistence bordering on desperation that she'd seen in another pair of eyes, heard in another voice three years ago that awful night in Santa Fe, and though it made no sense, she knew at some gut level that the preacher intended to kill her.

They reached the door and Stephen fished a key out of his pocket, slid it into the keyhole of a large padlock.

He turned just as she lunged at his back, the blade refracting shards of firelight. Stephen swung his arm down onto her wrist, and it might have knocked the bowie to the rock, but Lana had momentum and a ferocious grip.

The blade sank into his thigh.

The preacher screamed and Lana saw him reach into his frock coat.

Lana was running now, enveloped in darkness. She tripped on the uneven rock, fell as a revolver thundered. Her ears ringing, she scrambled back

onto her feet and hauled toward that oval of dark gray in the distance, glancing back—flare of fire, another gunshot shattering the passage.

Ten seconds of hard running brought her out of the tunnel and into the early-evening light.

She followed the burro tracks under the rimrock, moving as fast as she could manage downhill toward Abandon, the hood of her cape blown back, snow pouring into her hair, down her neck.

It was the preacher's cabin glowing on the west slope, she figured. Had he lied about the heathens? Devised some way to murder the entire town?

On Main Street, Lana bent over, gasping, petered out, saw the preacher already halfway down the slope.

She looked south toward all the dark, empty buildings.

She could try to hide, but he'd hunt her all night.

North of town, she spotted movement, took a moment to realize it was just those burros Stephen had driven out of the mine, congregating at the livery.

• • •

Inside the barn, an albino, still saddled and toting a slicker roll, stood eating a bale of hay.

When Lana grasped the harness, the horse threw his head and whinnied, but she held firm and stroked his neck.

Her arctic slipped into the stirrup and she stood and swung her other leg over and settled into the saddle. She took up the reins and gave him a little kick, and he trotted out of the stable, halting under the overhanging roof.

The snow had let up and a bit of moon shone through between the clouds.

There was nothing left of dusk, and a voice whispered that she would die out there if she did this.

Gonna die here if I stay.

In the last light, she glimpsed the profile of a man hobbling out of town, heading toward the stables.

She dug the heel of her arctic into the horse's side and rode off into the dark.

2009

75

The wind was storm force at the Sawblade, blasting through the gap in streamers of freezing fog, the pass blown clean of snow. Scott held up a small yellow instrument with a digital display, locking arms with Abigail to keep her from blowing off the mountain.

They took cover on the lee side of the pass behind the palisade. Scott clipped a couple of carabiners onto the hip belts of their packs and short-roped them together.

He leaned over, shouted in Abigail's ear, "My Sherpa clocked that last wind gust at fifty-one miles per hour! Stay close!"

As they started down, Abigail couldn't help but think it a good thing the clouds had socked them in, so she couldn't see the sheer drop that awaited even the slightest misstep. Two days ago, she'd freaked out on this part of the mountain, been paralyzed by vertigo.

Despite the relentless wind, the rocky trail near the top lay under three feet of snow.

Scott led, Abigail close enough behind so she could touch his pack if she reached out.

They descended slowly, painstakingly.

Before each step, Scott stabbed the old ski poles he hiked with through the snow to probe the depth and check the ledge width, ensuring they didn't stumble onto a cornice. Abigail followed in his footsteps, trying to ignore how the oval of her face not protected by the hood of her Gore-Tex jacket was progressing once again from burning into numbness.

The wind let up the lower they went.

After the sixth switchback, Scott stopped to unclip their carabiners.

Where they stood, in the upper realm of the cirque, the wind had diminished to a soft, icy breeze. They'd dropped out of the clouds into a boulder field, the snow having buried all but the largest rocks, the lumpy white terrain resembling a field of sugar cubes.

They moved on. Within the hour, they reached the timberline, and though still post-holing in waist-deep snow, they had come safely down from the pass and back into the trees.

The sense of relief was potent and long overdue.

• • •

In the late afternoon, they rested at eleven thousand feet in a pure stand of Douglas fir. The cold front had pushed through, driven out the clouds, and scrubbed the sky into high-gloss Colorado blue. They dug out a spot in the snow, sat leaning against one of the old firs, eating gorp, sharing a bottle of water.

“Drink as much as you need,” Scott said. “I have a filter with me, so I can pump more.”

“I feel guilty drinking this,” Abigail said. “Knowing my dad doesn’t have this luxury.”

Scott broke open a pistachio, plucked out the nut meat. “You getting dehydrated isn’t gonna … Lawrence is your father?”

“We aren’t close. He left us when I was very young.”

Abigail lifted the Nalgene bottle, and as she unscrewed the lid to take another sip, it twitched, the tree trunk between them went *psst,* a piece of bark flew off, struck her face, and two streams of water shot out from the middle of the bottle, one arcing into the snow, the other into her lap.

Abigail said, “What the—”

The delayed report of a high-powered rifle broke out above them in the cirque.

Scott tackled her into the snow.

“How close?” she whispered.

“There was a three-second lag from when the bullet hit the bottle to the gunshot… . If he’s shooting one of the bigger cartridges, he’s maybe … fourteen, fifteen hundred yards away. Just under a mile. Probably scoping us from the ledges below the pass.”

A bullet tore through Scott’s pack, followed by fleeting silence, then a resounding gunshot.

“I don’t know how the hell he’s got us sighted up in these woods,” Scott said. “You run first. I’ll be right behind you. Don’t run in a straight line. Zig-zag between the trees. Make yourself a harder target. Go.”

Abigail scrambled up out of the snow, took off downhill through the firs.

After ten steps, she heard another gunshot, glanced back, didn’t see Scott, kept running, thinking, *The bullet’ll hit you. You’ll go down, might never hear the shot.*

She came out of the forest into the little glade where they'd camped three nights ago, and on the other side, she ducked behind a tree. When she caught her breath, Abigail peeked around the corner, spotted Scott running toward her across the glade.

He stepped behind the tree, threw his pack down in the snow.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I wanna see where this fucker is." He unzipped the top of his pack, jammed his hand inside, and pulled out a small black leather case, which he unsnapped.

He took out a pair of eight-power Nikon binoculars and lay flat in the snow.

Propped up on his elbows, so the lenses just barely poked above the surface, he brought the eyecups to his eyes, adjusted the focus knob, and glassed the cirque.

After a minute, he said, "There you are. Shit, I thought we were making much better time. You wanna see?"

Abigail got down in the snow with him and took the binoculars. Scott guided her finger to the focus knob. "First, find the pass," he said. She glassed the buttresses and couloirs of the cirque in the big sphere of magnification, then the jagged rock outcropping of the Sawblade, two thousand feet above and a mile away, the sharp rocks and snow glinting in the sun, a deep, shimmering quality to the condensed air.

"Okay, I've got it," she said.

"See the trail we took?"

"Yeah."

"Just follow it on down."

Abigail adjusted the focus, slowly glassing the ledges, tracing their steep descent down the back wall of the cirque. "I see him," she said.

"That's the guy who locked you in the mine?"

"Yeah, that's Quinn."

Minuscule among the huge broken crags, Quinn post-holed at a fast lope just past the fifth switchback in that silver-and-black down jacket. He toted a backpack and a scope-bearing rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Oh my God," she said. "He's almost down from the ledges." Abigail lowered the binoculars. "He's gonna catch up to us, Scott, and he has our tracks to follow."

Scott’s face paled, and she wondered if it was from blood loss or fear. He said, “We have to get down below the snow line.”

76

Abigail and Scott worked their way down through the trees at a lung-wrenching jog. The valley broadened. They passed into a forest of spruce and aspen. At ten thousand feet, the snow was only knee-deep. At nine thousand, just a foot lay on the ground. Abigail's tailbone felt like it had split, and she saw blood in Scott's tracks, his right boot squishing.

• • •

A little past six o'clock in the evening, they arrived at the alpine lake where they'd lunched on Sunday afternoon. The sun had slipped below the valley wall an hour ago, and a fleet of leaden clouds invaded from the west. Scott's Sherpa put them at 8,700 feet, but they still stood in snow to their ankles.

"How you holding up?" Abigail said.

He squatted by the bank. "Fucking agony."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing. We just have to keep descending. Think Quinn's stopping?"

They pushed on past the spruce-rimmed lake, down and down, faster than they'd moved all day, light dwindling, clouds thickening up, dark and without texture, an immense sheet of metal stretched across the sky. They tramped through occasional patches of bare ground. Then there were more bare spots than snow-covered ones. Then just tatters of wet snow on the tree-shaded north aspects. Then no snow at all, but only the naked floor of the forest—spongy and saturated from two days of cold November rain.

• • •

At dusk, they came into the aspen grove—slim silvered trunks as far as they could see, some marred with arborglyphs, carved graffiti from the old West.

Abigail hadn't noticed it before, but the aspens had eyes, hundreds of them all around her, mysterious dark bark scars from where old branches used to be, watching her from every side.

Scott collapsed. "We have to decide," he said, breathless, "whether to stop for the night or keep going."

“Could you even go on any farther?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, but maybe you can.”

“I’m not going anywhere at night and alone with this lunatic out here. Besides, I’m wiped out, too.”

“Well, we’re out of the snow, so we’d better find a place to camp.” Scott struggled to his feet. “The valley’s a half mile wide here. Let’s get ourselves out of the middle of it.”

As they headed east through the aspen, Abigail felt her stomach tighten. The imminent threat to her life notwithstanding, there was still something unnerving about being in the wilderness with night coming on and watching the sky lose its light above you, a sinking feeling rooted in the most basic of primal fears—the woods after dark.

They came to a stream. It flowed stronger than Abigail remembered, and it seemed two lifetimes ago that she’d watched Scott fly-fish this same watercourse two miles up the valley for their supper. “Stream’s up,” he said. “I’m gonna filter some water, since we can’t camp here. First place Quinn will look for us is along this stream. We’d never hear him coming.”

They climbed down into the gully and found a place at the water’s edge beside a pool protected from the chaos of the main current and clogged with aspen leaves that looked like gold coins floating in the water. Scott dug the PUR filter out of his pack and inserted the two hoses into the bottom. He fitted the end of one with a bottle adapter and screwed it onto an empty Nalgene bottle. The other hose, he dropped in the pool.

Abigail sat beside him in the fading light, watching Scott pump the filter and holding the newly filled bottles between her legs. She kept looking back up the gully. Scott had been right. Streamside, you couldn’t hear a thing but the chatter of water flowing over rocks. Approaching footsteps would be lost in the noise. When he’d topped off five Nalgene bottles, Scott disassembled the filter and packed everything away.

There would be no dry, easy crossing.

They forded the stream—fifteen feet across and thigh-deep in the middle, so strong that Abigail had to brace herself and lean into the current to keep her footing. The water had been snow less than an hour ago. Her legs burned and her lungs contracted from the freezing shock of it.

They climbed onto the bank and up the muddy gully on the other side, hiked several hundred yards over a forest floor carpeted with brilliant aspen

leaves.

The air smelled metallic and stale. It began to rain.

Scott turned to her, said, “I see where we’ll camp tonight,” and Abigail followed him into a thicket of chokecherry, not much space between the shrubs, but enough to conceal a tent.

77

Four nylon bags lay spread out on the ground, containing the footprint, poles, pegs, and the tent itself—a bright red Hilleberg. They unrolled the footprint in a cleared area between the chokecherry shrubs, and Scott unfolded the tent while Abigail took out the poles and locked them together. In the deepening darkness, as the rain set in, they slipped the three poles into the tent sleeves and staked out the guylines, Scott's hands shaking so badly that he could barely grip the pegs to jam them into the softened ground.

With the tent pitched, they threw their packs into the roomy vestibule, climbed in, and zipped themselves inside. Scott shivered uncontrollably, and he slurred his words.

Abigail said, "You have spare clothes in here?" He nodded. "Why don't you get in the tent and take off your wet ones." Scott unzipped the inner tent and crawled inside. While he stripped, Abigail pulled everything out of his pack, realized she didn't feel right, either—her motor coordination was disrupted and she had trouble focusing on the task at hand.

"I can't find your sleeping bag," she said.

"Bottom compartment." She dragged out the Marmot compression bag, tossed it in with the Therm-a-Rest and his bag of extra clothes. Then she unlaced her boots, pulled off her socks, all her soaked clothing, and climbed in.

Scott twisted shut the air valve on the Therm-a-Rest, laid his sleeping bag on top of it. He wriggled inside, said, "Get in with me. We both have hypothermia."

Abigail climbed into the down mummy bag and zipped them up. Scott spooned her. She could feel him shaking against her, their legs so cold, like malleable ice.

"I should really get us something to eat and drink," she said.

"Just stay here with me for a minute, get some body heat going."

They lay shivering together, listening to the rain patter on the tent. The sky detonated. Thunder shook the ground and decayed like a shotgun blast, Abigail thinking it sounded so different from East Coast thunder. In the West, it was deeper, right on top of you, and seemed to fade forever.

“Think we’re safe in this thicket?” Abigail asked.

“As long as we stay quiet and don’t turn on any lights. Fuck, I can’t get warm.”

Abigail turned and faced him. She ran her hand along the right side of his abdomen. It felt hot, swollen, and sticky. “Your wound’s leaking,” she said.

“My boot was full of blood. I’m hurting pretty bad again.”

“I saw the first-aid kit in your pack. I’m gonna get it out, and you’re gonna tell—”

“You think I’m dying?” he asked.

“No,” she said, though she didn’t know. “I think once we get some food and medicine in you, you’ll feel a lot better.”

She started to sit up, but Scott stopped her. “Not yet,” he said. “Just stay with me. This is the worst shit I’ve ever been in. And I’ve been in some real shit. You believe in karma?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I think it’s fucking me over at the moment.”

“How so?”

“This trip isn’t the first time I’ve gotten someone killed in the backcountry. I was involved in an accident on Rainier a couple years ago.”

“What’s Rainier?”

“*Mount* Rainier. The fourteen-thousand-foot volcano in Washington.”

“What happened? Or if you don’t want to talk about it, I—”

“Two years ago, me and a friend drove out from Boulder to do a mid-May ascent. It was stupid. Too early in the season to be on that mountain. Maria was a tall, gorgeous redhead. Strong. A solid rock climber, badass telemarking goddess. But she’d never done any serious mountaineering or glacier travel. She was inexperienced. I was cocky. Thought I could get her up the thing. And I did. We reached the summit cone, Columbia Crest. Had the time of our lives. But on a mountain like Rainier, all it takes is one mistake. A momentary lapse of judgment. And I made it. On the way down, Maria was jonesing to break out her skis. I knew it was a bad idea. Spring conditions. Variable snow. Everything from crust to corn. But I was feeling a little invincible after a perfect ascent.

“We were telemarking the upper edge of Ingraham Glacier. She was a much better skier, got out ahead. I’d told her to stay with me, that it was only safe to ski the top. Thing about Maria, she was always pushing it. She

was fifty yards ahead of me when she disappeared. I think she never even saw it.

I stopped at the edge of the crevasse. Thing was huge, and it dropped down at an angle, so I couldn't see to the bottom. I didn't see Maria, but I could hear her screaming down there in the dark. There was just no way to descend into that crevasse. I mean, some of these ice fissures go down hundreds of feet. I got off the mountain fast as I could, flew back with search-and-rescue in a big Chinook helicopter. But it had snowed, covered our ski tracks. I couldn't even lead them back to the crevasse she'd gone into. Now all this shit's happening to us out here. I figure it's payback karma, and I guess I deserve it."

• • •

Abigail used Scott's Krill glow stick for illumination, since it put out a soft blue light, which would be almost impossible to see beyond the thicket. Scott talked her through firing up the tiny propane stove out in the vestibule, and as the water heated for their freeze-dried dinners in a slug-punctured pot, Abigail broke out the first-aid kit. She used a syringe filled with filtered water to irrigate the wound, then wiped it with iodine, applied the antibiotic cream, resealed it with several closure strips, and taped on a gauze bandage. Scott took three tablets of extra-strength Tylenol with his supper, and by the time they'd finished eating, Abigail could see in his eyes that the pain had begun to ease.

• • •

The glow stick lay on the floor of the tent, casting their faces in a weak blue light, which made them look cold and cadaverous.

They talked—about Maria, about Abigail's father—their painful memories a diversion from the fear. Abigail could feel sleep stalking her, waiting to pounce. She lifted a Nalgene bottle, took a long drink, the water excellent—pure and ice cold, tasting faintly of iron.

"Knowing what happened to you on Rainier," she said, "I'm surprised you ever went back into the mountains after that. Doesn't it feel like returning to the scene of a tragedy?"

"I never thought of it that way. These mountains, the West, they're my first love. See, I was born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida. A flatlander.

Until I was fifteen, I'd never been west of Dallas. I'd seen the Smokies, the Adirondacks. But those are just big hills. Most exciting time of my life was the summer after my freshman year of high school, July of '93, when my dad rented an RV and took our family west.

"God. The day we drove across Kansas into Colorado. Interstate Seventy. The plains. The vastness of the sky. That high, dry air. Sinatra's *The Very Good Years* playing on the tape deck. Always think of that summer when I hear Frank's voice. He was our sound track for that trip." Scott's smile contained a measure of wistfulness.

"Never forget, I'm sitting up front with my dad and we're barreling west, an hour or so from Denver, when, way off on the horizon, I see what looks like a bank of clouds. I ask him what it is and he tells me that's the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, and what looks like clouds is actually snow. Snow in July. I couldn't even imagine it. I'd only seen snow twice in Jacksonville. I wanted to be up in those mountains. On top of them. Needed to know every ridge, every crag. Next day, we drove up Mount Evans, one of the fourteeners. Me and my little sis had a snowball fight on the summit, and that was it. I was a mountain boy thereafter." Scott leaned forward and zipped up the mesh door of the inner tent. They climbed into his sleeping bag, turned off the glow stick.

"Tomorrow scares me," Abigail whispered.

"We're gonna head out early, while it's still dark. Just leave the tent here. We did good today. It's only another six or seven miles to the trailhead."

"You've got the keys to your truck, right?"

"Top of my pack."

They were quiet for a while, the sound of rain working on them like a tranquilizer.

"There's this part of me," Abigail whispered, "just wants to leave him in that cave."

Scott pulled her in close, their eyes shutting, both surrendering to the steady hiss of rain and far-off thunder.

78

Abigail opened her eyes and looked at her watch—3:48 A.M. It was still raining, still pitch-black inside the tent. The sound of Scott unzipping the sleeping bag had woken her, and now he was crawling out of it.

“What are you doing?” Abigail whispered.

“I put it off long as I could stand it. I gotta go like nobody’s business.”

“Here, take this with you.”

Abigail twisted the base of the glow stick. It lighted up and she tossed it to him.

“This is the worst part of camping,” he grumbled, slipping into his fleece pullover. “When you absolutely, positively have to get out of your warm tent in the middle of a cold, rainy night to take a shit.”

Abigail nestled back into the bag, asleep again before Scott got his boots on.

• • •

Abigail shot up in the sleeping bag. She’d been dreaming about wandering through an endless cave, room after room after room, and for a second, she thought she was still in that cave with her father, and that climbing up the chimney and finding Scott and being shot at had all been a dream.

The disorientation passed. She was tucked away in a thicket, somewhere in the lower reaches of that long valley, and, she realized, on the cusp of dawn, because she could just make out the tunnel-shaped walls of the tent and the bottles of water at her feet.

She rubbed her eyes, glanced at her watch again—4:58 A.M. A quiet voice in her head asked, *Why isn’t Scott here?* She vaguely remembered waking some time ago. Then her mind cleared and it all came back. *It’s been over an hour since Scott went out there to shit in the woods.*

Abigail put on her fleece jacket and her parka, found that her fleece pants and wool socks had mostly dried out. She dressed, unzipped the inner tent, and climbed through the vestibule, the door to which Scott had left open.

She poked her head outside—little to see in this first light, surrounded by chokecherry shrubs still holding on to most of their sunset-colored leaves.

Abigail pushed her way out of the thicket and emerged into the aspen grove.

The rain had stopped, the wind had stilled, and the light was so fragile that she couldn't yet tell if the sky was clear or uniformly clouded. She made a careful scan of the trees. She whispered, "Scott!" The only audible sound was the distant babble of the stream. The woods smelled of dead leaves, which made a deafening crunch under her boots. Her feet were already freezing in the damp socks.

She followed an old wash down through the trees, thinking Scott might have come this way to put some distance between the campsite and where he squatted.

Every few steps, she whispered his name. Her legs and tailbone were so sore from yesterday's trek, her knees gone to mush. She stopped. Listened. Looked back at the stain of the chokecherry thicket barely visible up the hill.

"Scott!" she whispered. "Scott!"

Fifty yards down the wash, something caught her eye—a shiver of blue light.

She jogged along the dry creekbed, came to the glow stick lying in the wet leaves.

She bent down and picked it up, trying to process what this meant and all the permutations of what might have happened.

When she looked up again, she saw Scott sitting against a whitewashed aspen covered in arborglyphs, his head drooped, Gramicci pants and thermal underwear still pulled down below his knees, and the front of his yellow fleece blacked with a half gallon of blood, spilled out from the dark slit that linked his earlobes.

She staggered back and collapsed on the bank, had to make herself breathe, her hands shaking, that voice now screaming in her head, *Get out of here right now, Abby.*

Somewhere nearby, leaves rustled. She stood up, looking from tree to tree to tree and at all the spaces between, misting now in the gray twilight, watched by all those aspen eyes.

Again, she heard the rustle of leaves. The noise had come from fifteen yards away, but there was no one there. This time, the sound of what she'd mistaken for footsteps originated a ways up the wash, and even as she

stared in that direction, she realized they hadn’t been footsteps at all, but the impact of thrown rocks.

The smoke of a menthol cigarette scooted by on the first breeze of dawn.

1893

79

Gloria Curtice came back to consciousness from the strangest dream: The preacher, Stephen Cole, had driven a pack train into the mine, screamed, “All yours!” and, instead of saving them, locked back the door.

She opened her eyes, stared at the shadowgee in the middle of the cavern, her head resting in Rosalyn’s lap.

The severe constriction of her throat made swallowing an excruciating proposition, and her tongue had become a foreign object in her mouth, an insensate strip of leather so swollen, it threatened to choke her. Her saliva had turned thick and foul-tasting, and between the riving headache and the stiffness in her neck, she didn’t dare move.

In the eerie silence, everyone waited to see who would die next. Gloria no longer trusted her eyes to distinguish reality from phantasm. Some things, she knew had happened, and she clung to these last vestiges of sanity. She knew, that days ago, three separate parties had taken lanterns and struck out in search of water or another way out, and that none had returned.

She knew she’d seen the smith, Mason Stetler, accused of stealing a biscuit by six miners, themselves delirious with hunger and thirst; had watched three of them pin him down while the others hoisted a boulder from a pile of crushed ore and dropped it on his head.

She thought, erroneously, she’d imagined the schoolmarm, who had stripped naked in the middle of the chamber to perform vaudeville—juggling rocks, inventing songs of starvation and heathens, attempting senseless magic tricks, and closing the act with a bizarre dance that resembled a solitary high-speed waltz.

Likewise, the barber, who proclaimed himself the devil, welcomed everyone to hell, and commanded them to worship at his feet, only to be silenced by a half-dead miner who’d heard enough, drawn his Colt, and shot a hole through Lucifer’s throat.

She felt certain the owner of the merc, Jessup Crider, had assumed a grim task when he’d addressed the living, that he’d actually stood weeping before them, speaking in a hoarse whisper, tongue so ballooned, he could hardly push the words through his teeth.

Jessup had said he'd been providing goods and services to the people of Abandon going on ten years and that he wanted to offer one last service. He had a carbine and two boxes of cartridges and any man, woman, or child who preferred to forgo this elongated death could come to him right now, and he'd not only spare them the agony but also the damnable sin of self-destruction.

Gloria had watched ten people drag themselves to a far corner of the cavern and sit shoulder-to-shoulder. They'd whispered last words to loved ones, last prayers, and then Jessup had walked behind them with a lever-action Winchester—one bullet each in the back of the head.

As ten streamlets of blood ran out and converged to fill a swag in the rocky floor, several people had gone and knelt at the edge of the pool, gleaming like black lacquer in the firelight, and lapped up the warm blood.

Some hours later, Jessup had extended the offer again, got twenty takers the second time. Gloria would have been one of them had she possessed the strength to lift her hand or to voice her desire.

Jessup himself had barely been able stand or even cock the Winchester's lever, and he'd given everyone ample warning that this was their last opportunity to make use of him.

When he'd seen to his customers, she'd watched him position the barrel of the carbine under his own chin.

Gloria knew that Jessup and his final act of kindness had not been an illusion of her disintegrating mind, because she would occasionally glance over at the thirty bodies slumped together on the floor, raging with envy that she was not among them.

She tried to escape into sleep again, kept telling herself that one of these times she wouldn't wake up.

This wasn't hell.

It couldn't go on forever.

80

Joss heard the roar in the distance and smelled the water. Melted candle drippings oozed onto her left hand, but she didn't flinch, her fingers already coated with hardened white wax. She smiled because she recognized the sound of the cascade pouring into the subterranean lake where she and Lana had taken those first gorgeous gulps of water after leaving the main cavern. She might actually find her way back from here.

The flame quivered as she entered the waterfall room, and it would have extinguished in the draft, but she had it cupped with her right hand.

Joss climbed down the wet rock and knelt at the lake's edge, figured it had been at least a full day since her last drink. She held the candle in her left hand and bent over and dipped her face into the water, letting it siphon into her mouth. As she drank, several icy drops splashed on the back of her head, probably runoff from an overhanging stalactite, but, too engrossed in sating her thirst, Joss didn't distinguish the sudden hiss from the overwhelming crush of the waterfall.

When she lifted her head from the lake, she first noticed the odor of smoke, and then the black. Black beyond dreamless sleep or how she imagined death might be, like something had come along and snatched her eyes right out of their sockets.

She looked at her left hand, felt the candle in her fingers, saw only the faintest impression of the wick, fading from orange into amber.

"Calm the fuck down, Jocelyn. You got one match left."

She reached under her serape into the lapel pocket of her cotton dress shirt, felt her fingers graze the sliver of sulfur-tipped wood.

She took it out, held it in front of her face.

"You're holdin your life in that little splinter."

She'd performed this trick any number of times, even derived a measure of pride from it, to the point that six years ago she'd thrown out the piece of flint she kept in the prayer book with her papers and tobacco.

The move was simple—lift her serape and shirt, strike the match against the middle of three buttons that fastened her canvas trousers.

She set the candle beside her on the rock and lifted her shirt, reaching down in the dark, fingering the trio of metal buttons.

She held the match in her right hand and closed her eyes. Instead of being in a cave, she imagined herself chained up behind the bar in that beautiful saloon of hers, chewing the dog with Bart or Oatha, flirting with Zeke, glaring at that porch-percher Al, nooning by the stove. She conjured the aroma of whiskey, the cold rancid sweat of hardworking men. No big deal. No great importance attached to this match. Just time for a cigarette.

In the darkness, her hand moved, the match gliding toward her crotch. She was trying not to overthink it, but she noted she couldn't remember the last time she'd snapped a punk—this thought interrupted as she felt the match head graze the surface of the button.

Acrid bite of sulfur, then the match flared and the lake lighted up, firelight reflected in the water and the crystals, and she could have cried as she reached for the candle.

Her hand slid across wet rock—nothing there.

"The fuck?"

Already, the heat of the flame was descending toward her thumb and forefinger.

She leaned onto her right buttock, thinking maybe she'd sat on it, but no. Now, carefully, bringing the flame over to the rock, searching the contours, the crystalline veins—still nothing—edging her fingers farther down the match as the flame pursued, desperation setting in, and the heat building, nowhere for her fingers to go now, the fire blackening her thumbnail, her teeth gritted, her skin beginning to bubble, and the last thing she saw before the flame smothered was the candle, three feet from the bank, floating in the lake.

Again, the black, and, as if her brain sensed she'd seen her last light, disorientation flooded in.

"You ain't dead yet," she said, rising to her feet. She still had her bearings. She couldn't see it, but she knew that on the other side of this lake stood the opening to a flat tunnel she'd have to crawl through. From there, she'd take it one room at a time. No rush. No panic. She'd scream. Listen. She'd find them, or they'd find her.

Joss took baby steps along the rocky bank, arms outstretched. She came to a wall she couldn't feel the top of, but there were handholds, so she climbed, the waterfall getting louder, as though she stood above it now. And

still she climbed, uncertain, just grasping in the dark, trusting her arms and legs to take her where—

Her right foot slipped, and she gripped wet rock, feet scrambling for purchase, her fingers cramping.

It hit her—a load of buckshot colder than Emerald Lake in June, with more properties of liquid metal than water, the current dragging her toward that hole that drained the lake deep into the mountain, kept the depth constant.

She came up gasping, lungs, heart, muscles, bones stunned, standing now in two feet of freezing water, stumbling on, no intended direction or destination beyond someplace dry.

After awhile, her knees banged into the bank and she crawled up onto it and climbed until her head struck a wall.

“Goddamn it!”

The way her voice blared back in her face, she figured she’d crawled into some kind of alcove. The air smelled fixed, and her hands shook so hard, she couldn’t grasp the buttons on her cotton shirt.

She ripped it open, pulled her arms out of the sleeves, undid her trousers.

Her boots poured out several jars’ worth of water apiece, and then she sat there naked, shivering in the black and colder than she’d ever been in her life, leaning against a flat-topped rock, sizing up her predicament, chuckle-headed with shock.

“Well, you got a Chinaman’s chance now a gettin out a this hitch, you fuckin yack.” She wiped her eyes, humiliated, facing death, and realizing she didn’t have as much sand as she’d thought. This was worse than looking up a limb at the string party awaiting her in Arizona. No hiding from it—she was down-i n-her-boots afraid, with not even a blanket to fill to calm her nerves.

She thought about Lana, wondered if she’d gotten herself back to Abandon, imagined that by now she’d freed everybody. They’d probably have a big meal of soft grub, outdoing even their Christmas Eve supper. But not her. She was done. Done being a saloonist, only thing she’d ever loved, never pour a shot of rotgut in that dog hole again, never taste whiskey, feel the sting of tobacco smoke inflating her lungs, never spread mustard with the rich, never exchange corral dust with the miners, never tell another

bugged-up, bandbox, mail-order cowboy he weren't shit and to take his ready-mades and get the fuck out, never scheme with another picaro.

"*Got me, didn't Ye?*" she yelled. "Congratulations! You picked one fuckin helluva way to save me. *This funny to You? Wearin a big smile up there?* Let me tell You the straight goods. You think I'm gettin down on my knees now my leg's tied up and I'm feelin poorly, gonna beg You to spare me, make amends for my behavior and pledge everlastin loyalty, You got another fuckin thing comin. Thought it'd be like gettin money from home breakin my ass down in front a my unshucked self? Thought You'd steal my dignity while You kilt me? Well, fuck You! Don't know if You was watchin back there, but I saved Your child, Lana. Won my spurs, far as I'm concerned. *Why You hate me?* Tell You what. You all-powerful, all-knowin? We can call the shit even if You end me right now. Don't care how You do it, long as it's quick and—"

She didn't see it, but she felt it.

The alcove shook and filled with dust.

The waterfall went mute.

Her lungs burned, and within thirty seconds, the sulfur gas had killed her.

2009

81

Abigail spun around, whispered, “No.”

Isaiah stood between two scarred aspen trees, his breath pluming in the cold, moist air. He reached down, lifted his trouser leg, unsnapped the ankle sheath he’d taken from Jerrod, and slipped out the little dagger.

“Your boy over there never saw it coming. Cut his throat mid-shit. But I *want* you to see me coming. I want you to watch me carve up that beautiful ass.”

Isaiah dragged on his cigarette, the ash cherry flaring and fading. Then he threw it down, blew out a stream of smoke, and started toward her.

Abigail sprinted up the dry creekbed as the mist thickened into rain, her lungs raw in the thin air. She spotted the chokecherry thicket in the distance, glanced back, tripped over a rotted log, plowing face-first through the soppy bed of the wash.

She sat up, dazed, sucking air as she wiped the cold mud out of her eyes.

Snow mixed with the rain—big flakes falling silently between the aspen.

Abigail clambered back onto her feet and ran up the wash, tree trunks chipping off all around her, bark exploding. Ten more strides, then she ducked into the thicket and dived through the open tent door. Scott’s pack lay in the corner of the vestibule. She turned it over and unzipped the top compartment as brittle leaves crunched outside. She reached in, pulled out everything—bottle of sunscreen, map, wallet, small compression bag labeled “Scott’s emergency kit,” and finally the ring of keys.

She peeked out the vestibule through the chokeberries’ foliage, bright as pyrotechnics in the dismal dawn.

All she could see of Isaiah was the pair of black leather boots just beyond the thicket.

“Why don’t you come on out so we can do this?”

Bullets ripped through the tent. Abigail flattened herself on the ground, closed her eyes, clenching her hand around the keys so tightly, they cut into her skin.

“Get the fuck out here. Be ten times worse if I have to come in there, drag your ass out.”

Abigail slid the locking mechanism up the drawstring and opened Scott's emergency kit.

It contained a whistle, a space blanket, waterproof matches.

"Bitch, I am counting to five."

Two packs of Emer'gen-C. A Clif Bar.

"One. Two."

And a Swiss army knife.

"Three."

She opened the blade, stabbed it through the rain fly, sliced a door in the fabric.

As Isaiah reached five and began pushing his way into the thicket, she crawled out the back of the tent and rolled under the shrubs.

She got up and accelerated to a dead run, turned back in time to see Isaiah emerge from the thicket and shove a new magazine into his machine pistol, the sound of her panting growing deeper, more frenzied, felt like she was drowning, short on air to fuel her legs.

She stepped behind a big aspen, light-headed, head pounding, trying to gasp quietly.

Isaiah shot by.

She watched him run down through the trees.

Ten yards. Twenty. Thirty.

He suddenly stopped, his back to her, head cocked, listening.

Abigail spotted a rock lying at the toe of her right boot among the roots. She picked it up, threw it as hard as she could, hoping it would make a diversionary racket in the dead leaves, that when Isaiah went to check it out, the noise of his footsteps would provide her cover to slip around to the other side of the aspen. With the thousands of trees in this grove, if she could only lose him for a moment, she had a chance.

But the rock skipped off a tree trunk and landed just five yards downslope of Isaiah.

He spun around and looked right at her, shook his head, half-smiling, as if miffed at a petulant child. With few trees between them, he had a clear shot. Kept her covered with the machine pistol as he jogged upslope.

Abigail sank down onto the roots, her hands shaking.

Isaiah stopped ten feet away, let go of his machine pistol, and unholstered the knife.

“Where’s everybody else?”

She clutched the keys in one hand, the Swiss army knife in the other.

“We got locked in a cave,” she said. “I was the only one who could climb out.”

“Who locked you in?”

“This man pretending to be a history professor. Told us you’d been holding him at Emerald House for several—”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s what he said. He killed Stu. Threw him off the third floor of the mansion.”

Isaiah’s brown eyes dilated. “Why’d he lock you in a cave?”

“I don’t know. I guess so he could have the gold all to himself.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I saw it. Touched it.”

Isaiah came forward. “Where?”

“There’s this old mining tunnel, and at the end of it, a locked iron door. You pass through, and off to the right in a little alcove, that’s where all the burlap sacks are. We counted over sixty-one bars. Look, you’ve been lied to, so I won’t be shocked if you don’t—”

“How do you get to this tunnel?”

“Why would I tell you that?”

Isaiah knelt down, held the knife point under her left eye.

Abigail said, “And how do you plan to haul it out of these mountains on your own?”

Isaiah’s eyes slimmed down into raging slits.

“You think,” she whispered, “that what you went through in the war entitles you—”

He pushed the knife point into her lower eyelid as Abigail worked the blade of the Swiss army knife open with her thumbnail.

“I take what I want,” he said, “because I have the big fucking balls to do it. You think people let shit slip away ’cause they’re decent? Or moral? They don’t take what they want ’cause they’re spineless and gutless and terrified of God’s retribution. Well, I’m not. I’ve already been to hell.” Isaiah stood up. “Now get off your cunt and—”

He stepped back and sat down.

The report echoed through the aspen grove.

Isaiah dropped his knife and unzipped the black parka and his black fleece jacket and raised his T-shirt. Blood pulsed out of a small hole in the center of his chest and ran down his washboard stomach, pooling in his belly button, spilling over, diverting at his waistband. He looked up at Abigail as if it were her fault, then fell over into the wet leaves.

She ran her hands along his sides, felt a bulge in the left pocket of the parka. Working the zipper open, her hands closing on her father's Ruger, she transferred the revolver to her jacket, then slipped the machine pistol's nylon strap over Isaiah's head and stepped behind the tree as another round zipped past her ear and severed a sapling.

She swung out with a two-handed grip, and squeezed the eight-pound trigger.

Quinn stepped behind a tree as the Glock bucked, sprayed the forest, pushing Abigail back with the force of a high-pressure water hose, a stream of brass casings arcing over her right shoulder, flames shooting out the compensator ports, the machine pistol vacating the thirty-three-round magazine before it even crossed her mind to let up on the trigger.

She stumbled forward as the slide locked back, the gun impotent.

Abigail surveyed the aspen grove—no movement, no sound save for the hiss of rain and snow falling on the Glock's smoking suppressor.

She heard a soft whistle behind her, looked back, saw blood boiling and sucking back into the hole in Isaiah's chest.

She threw down the machine pistol and began to run.

1893

82

Lana standing by the living room window, staring through frosted glass at the crowd of carolers come to serenade her this Christmas night, their faces awash in candlelight, *Silent night, holy night,* a figure stumbling up the alameda toward the front door, *Darkness flies, all is light,* the choir faltering, *Feel free to get the fuck off my yard,* the carolers dispersing, Lana retreating to the Steinway, seating herself at the piano bench, thinking, *My playing soothes him, perhaps some Brahms,* the keys tinkling icily as the front door opens, slams, the meter quickening with her heartbeat as his boots pound the hardwood floor, his footsteps and the piquant waft of cactus juice moving toward—

• • •

The stillness shook her from the dream.

Lana opened her eyes—starry and cold beyond reason, the horse standing in snow to its stomach, wind-broke and panting.

She was high above the timberline, between two promontories that seemed vaguely familiar, masses of rock and ice in black relief against the navy sky.

She realized she'd seen them two and half years ago through the dusty window of a coach that summer afternoon she'd first made the long trip to Abandon, though the wilderness had looked quite different then—greened out and only pockets of dirty snow in the shadowed mountain flanks. This was the crest of the main wagon trail, a twelve-thousand-foot pass between a pair of knobs collectively named the Teats.

Having slept with her head drooped the last several hours, she winced from a neck crick as she assessed the moon's position in the sky, estimating the hour to be approaching midnight. Thank God the horse seemed to know the way, although she wondered how much farther she could push this salado. But what was the alternative? Dismount, unfasten the apron straps, and spread out the bedroll? Star-pitch in six feet of snow?

Falling asleep on the way out of town, her feet had tingled with cold. Now they hung in the stirrups, disturbingly innocuous, a complete lack of sensation that she hoped was warmth.

Her hands ached, which she took for a good sign, balled up into fists inside the mittens to conserve heat. She had a suspicion it was lethally cold, but in the absence of wind, the thirty-below air temperature felt less pronounced.

Lana turned in the saddle, looked back the way she'd come—a smooth snowy slope bright as day under the moon, bruised only by horse tracks that more resembled the delicate indentation of a sandpiper's footprints on a beach.

Miles away, she could see the opening to Abandon's box canyon, the town itself hidden from view.

Again she traced the path her horse had taken, following the tracks five hundred feet back down the slope, across a narrow bench, then one last dip toward timberline, where at that moment one of the trees broke away from the forest and moved upslope.

Stephen Cole, she thought.

She attempted to gauge the distance—a mile, mile and a half at most.

He's following my tracks.

She looked at what lay ahead—it appeared as if the trail descended gradually over the next few miles, then dropped into the forest, where it paralleled the course of what she recalled was a river in the summertime.

Far, far on—ten, maybe fifteen miles beyond this drainage at whose headwaters she stood—something glowed in a distant valley.

Silverton.

It seemed impossibly far.

• • •

Lana darling. Could I steal your attention?

Her fingers rest on the ivory keys, piano bench squeaking as he eases down beside her, his breath heavy with a strange-smelling smoke and soured by tequila, maybe the better part of a jug, though she doesn't know for sure. He can hold the liquor of three high lonesomes.

Why are you dressed up like a sore toe?

It's Christmas, John.

Is it. He unbuttons his claw hammer, rising slightly to straighten the tails. *I'm not back to stay.*

She looks up at him, his eyes turned inward, dreamy with opium, pupils huge black disks reflecting the candles that line the top of the Steinway.

John, you aren't yourself.

Thank God for that. He grins, something rote drunkenness rarely elicits.

You went to that hop-alley den, saw your celestial. I can smell the smoke on—

This is engaging beyond all expectations, but they're holding up the game for me.

How much?

That grin again.

How much?

Down to my last chip, as they say, although it isn't really a chip in the conventional—

How. Much. Did you lose?

It would appear that Mr. Carson is now the proud owner of our casa.

What?

It was the worst streak of cards any man has ever drawn. Everyone at the table agreed.

You gambled our home?

Well. Yes. But all hope is not lost. The game took an interesting turn.

Lana tugged at the reins and pulled up just shy of the forest, the Teats looming under the brilliant smear of the Milky Way, and saw, not half a mile back, the rider progressing toward her.

She reached down and patted the horse's neck a moment before booting it on.

• • •

The forest dark save for when she moved across glades, the sky like ragged spiderwebs through the branches, the silk glistening with stars, and so quiet when they stopped, she could hear the pulse of the albino's tired heart.

She shifted in the saddle, the leather creaking.

The odor of the horse smelled strong in the cold.

She listened, heard nothing but the occasional clicking of her teeth, like Morse code in the night. She touched her heels to the horse and rode down through the spruce.

• • •

An hour later, she passed through a blowdown, the firs all bent over and tangled up in themselves like spilt matches and dusted with fresh snow, the horse threading its way through the felled trees like it had come this way before.

In the forest below, an elk bugled.

The moon low in the sky behind a mountain, the stars teeming, the horse wavering, Lana shivering under her white cape, trying to stave off a sleep that taunted her with the rhythm of the hooves breaking powder.

• • •

The horse would have crushed her, but it neighed two seconds before toppling, and Lana woke, just managing to drag herself away from where its hindquarters crashed into the snow.

She scrambled to her feet and wiped the powder out of her face, found herself standing among aspen, the snow to her chest and the stars obscured, yielding to dawn.

The horse lay on its side, blowing deep, snorting exhalations that weakened as she listened. She wanted to speak to the albino, give the animal some measure of comfort, but she could only squat by its head and stroke its great jowls until its heart quit beating and its big eyes traded their pained intensity for the empty glaze of death.

83

Lana struggled on through the aspen, the numbness extending up from her feet into her ankles, her shins. Even her knees were beginning to burn.

She was passing through a glade and noting the first rumor of warmth in the sky when she heard the snort of a horse.

As she looked back, a branch snapped somewhere in the grove.

The cold was momentarily displaced by fear.

She bounded into the woods, ripped a spruce branch from a sapling, and doubled back into the glade, proceeding on, using the branch to sweep her new tracks smooth, reentering the trees after thirty yards, thinking if she could find a ramada, or throw together a brush shelter of some kind, maybe he'd pass her by.

The voice stopped her.

"Help!"

She turned and peered between straight white aspen trunks back out into the glade.

Where her tracks branched stood a gray-cloaked girl with long black hair, face as white as china in the dawn light, big black eyes shining. She recognized this child, having seen her in Abandon.

"Please, ma'am!" the child called out. "Help me!"

Lana hesitated, something urging self-preservation, telling her to just keep heading down through the aspen.

It's a child, for Godsakes, *she told herself.*

A tuft of cloud went pink above her as Lana waded back into the glade.

The child turned and watched her approach, trembling with cold. Lana stopped several feet away.

She gestured toward the woods, trying to ask where her horse was, but the girl didn't catch her meaning.

"You wasn't supposed to leave."

Lana mouthed, "What?"

Parting the manga, reaching into her cloak, the girl said, "God put you and all the other wickeds in it. Papa told me all about it. And he says I gotta send you back."

Staring down the bore of a large revolver, the child thumbing the hammer, Lana lunged, seizing the slender wrist with half-frozen fingers, the gun shoved up at the sky, the concussive shock of the report rattling her eardrums.

The gun disappeared in the snow and Lana pushed the child down, thinking, *He's coming,* and as if the thought itself held the power of incantation, he appeared, wrapped in a lambskin lap robe and moving at a single-foot rack out of the woods on a starred blood bay, the full-stamped saddle groaning in the cold.

He checked the horse by the strap and dismounted, limping toward her and grasping his leg where she'd stabbed him, his face wrenched up in some brand of agony.

The child sat up, crying, "She pushed me, Papa. She *pushed* me."

Lana knelt down in the snow, hands digging through powder, searching for the revolver.

Her mittened fingers grazed something hard. She grasped it.

The preacher five feet away.

She pulled on nothing but a root as his weight came down on her, the snow and the subzero cold biting every square inch of exposed skin. He turned her over, his eyes slitted mad, gums the color of blued steel, and he worked to pry her hands away from her face, his fingers wrapping around her neck, Lana staring up at the preacher and the purple sky and the child's inquisitive face.

"Go over by the horse, Harriet," he said.

"I wanna watch."

"Now."

As the child moved away, he began to squeeze.

• • •

What kind of turn?

Her husband smiles, his fingers pattering on the last two keys, right foot tapping the damper pedal.

You remember Mr. Sakey?

Yes.

I hear y'all swapped words two days ago.

Lana brushes a wisp of blond hair behind her right ear.

He bumped into me at the market.

And you called him a fucking capper, took him to task for—

He isn't your friend. He dragged you into all this, John. *Crying now.* It's 'cause of him. You aren't the same man you were before you made his—

You own a razor tongue, Lana. Ought to know better than to set it loose on a man like Sakey.

I have a truthful tongue. You lost our house.

I'll get it back.

He reaches into his jacket, pulls out a razor, sets it on the piano.

How? With what money? Think they're just gonna let you back in the game on credit? They're probably all laughing at you as we—

I told you. I still got one chip left, and it's better than any hard chink or banknote.

He shuts his eyes, and she thinks he's on the verge of losing consciousness, hoping he is, his arm reaching for the top of the Steinway, between candles, fingers closing on a fist-size geode, halved and inlaid with amethyst, a prehistoric egg with purple crystals that flash in the candlelight as he swings it at her head.

• • •

The world graying, purple and black spots blooming like supernovas, blotting out the sky, the preacher's face, Lana thinking, *I'm dying in this glade,* her hands tearing open his duster, his frock coat.

"It'll be over in a minute."

Her left hand caught in an inner pocket, fingers grasping a piece of metal.

• • •

John squeezing her throat, the world graying, purple and black spots blooming like supernovas, blotting out the ceiling, her husband's face, Lana thinking, *I'm dying,* clawing at his eyes.

I'm sorry, Lana. I have to get back in the game.

• • •

The murder of color, gray fading toward black, the preacher apologizing, his tears speckling her face, salting her eyes, and on the edge of perception, a distant *woomph,* trailed by mounting thunder.

• • •

I love you, Lana.

Oxygen-deprived panic.

Unconsciousness.

Dreaming, John, you need help.

• • •

The pressure on her throat subsided.

Stephen Cole stood up, color returning to the sky, to the man.

She coughed.

He looked away from her, eyes asquint.

It sounded like a barrage of gunshots, and then she realized they were aspen, snapping like firecrackers.

• • •

Her mouth full of warm, liquid rust, choking, and pain beyond her three miscarriages combined, like she's swallowed lava.

Lana sits up, light-headed.

Alone in the living room, beside the piano bench, walls candlelit, the front of her gown soaked with blood, which still pours from her mouth.

• • •

Lana sat up.

The preacher simply disappeared, exploding back in a wall of powder, and she moved, too, glimpsing sky and snow and sky again, somersaulting, the trees screaming by, saw the horse sawn in two by a jagged aspen, mushrooming into a pink cloud, Stephen Cole ricocheting off a boulder.

• • •

She reaches into her mouth and screams.

• • •

Everything stopped, the air fragrant with crushed spruce and freshly hewn wood, Lana surprised to see the sky, that she wasn't buried in snow.

She sat up, her heart pumping, slowly moved her arms to verify they still worked, ran her hands down the length of her legs.

She looked back up the mountain.

The slide had carried her a few hundred yards downhill, the debris path littered with forest carnage—curdled snow and spruce and splintered aspen.

She got up and listened for a long time, the key she'd taken from Stephen Cole still clutched in her left hand, watching for any sign of movement.

She thought about the child, buried somewhere nearby.

The cold rushed back.

She lifted an uprooted aspen sapling and began to stab it through the snow, slowly working her way up toward the glade, probing for the little girl.

• • •

But unto Thee have I cried, O Lord. And in the morning shall my prayer prevent Thee.

Stephen Cole lay cemented in snow and darkness.

Lord, why castest Thou off my soul?

He thought his arm wouldn't work because he'd been packed under several hundred pounds of snow and trees. This was true, but the reason he couldn't move a single appendage owed to the shattering of the bones in his arms and legs, the severing of his spine in four places.

Why hidest Thou Thy face from me?

He tried to call out for Harriet, but the snow had crammed into his mouth, gagging him.

I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up. While I suffer Thy terrors I am distracted. Thy fierce wrath goeth over me.

It became difficult and then painful and then impossible to breathe.

He saw colors—violet and brown, columns of scalding light.

Thy terrors have cut me off. They came round about me daily like water. They compassed me about together.

He tried to pray for Harriet, for an end to any suffering, but his mind wandered to a windy South Carolina beach.

Lover and friend hast Thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.

He was buried deep in sand, lost, running out of air, but he could hear her voice shouting his name.

And then the miracle happened: Something punched through, jabbing his chest, and he smiled now, because Eleanor had found him. She was digging

him out, a shot of cold, fresh air streaming into his lungs, and he saw the sky and Eleanor staring down at him.

But she wasn't smiling. She looked angry.

He spit the sand out of his mouth and said, "Help me. Please, Eleanor. Please."

She began to bury him back.

2009

84

Abigail descended into a forest of ponderosa and Gambel oak, passed through curtains of mist between the trees, rain falling cold and steady, the air scented with wet pine. She'd been going for an hour when she came to the stream, fell to its muddy bank, and shoveled into her mouth handfuls of water so cold, her eyes ached.

• • •

Early afternoon, she walked out of the valley. The rain had let up, and what lay ahead looked familiar—a broad piece of open country surrounded by wooded mountains. Where the low dark clouds collided into the upper slopes, the conifers shone white with snow.

She spotted a ridge a mile away across the field. The map her father had drawn for her indicated that she needed to climb over it.

Though she didn't like the prospect of venturing out into the open, she caught her breath and went on anyway, running hard as she could through the knee-high grasses, praying a wall of fog would sweep through and keep her hidden. After a half mile, she ducked behind a boulder, sat down, panting and thirsty, the soles of her feet raw, warm blood pooling in her boots. She peeked over the top of the rock, looked back across the boulder-strewn field toward the opening of the ten-mile valley that climbed up to the Sawblade. Thunder boomed. She thought she heard a rifle report. Abigail prostrated herself, her heart beating against the saturated ground.

• • •

Out of fear and because of the mounting pain in her blistered feet, Abigail crawled the rest of the way through the field. It rained again, her knees and palms rubbing raw.

It took an hour to cover half a mile, but she finally arrived at the foot of the long ridge.

The moment she started walking again, she knew she should never have gotten off her feet. With every step, she reached a new level of agony, forced to trade off between walking on her heels and the sides and the balls

of her feet, wishing she'd put some moleskin on her blisters last night when she'd had the chance.

Climbing up the mountainside, she fell into a rhythm—two steps, rest, deep breath, two steps, rest, deep breath, on and on. She thought that when they'd descended this slope during the hike in, they'd followed a path, but she figured it would be safer now to stay off-trail.

She came into a glade, saw that open country far below, boulders reduced to pebbles in a sea of dead grass. Something moved down there—the size of an ant from five hundred feet above, but clearly the figure of a man, halfway across the field, progressing at a tireless jog.

She hurried on. The mountainside became steep—snow on the trees and on the ground. She climbed into the clouds, colder and darker here, with intermittent bursts of snow. Fog enveloped the woods, thick as smoke, Abigail on her hands and knees now, the slope so steep, she wondered how the trees stood upright.

At last, she reached the summit of the ridge, socked in and snowing, clouds streaming through the treetops. She ran, moaning every time her feet hit the ground. Then she was heading down, digging her heels into the snow to slow her descent, a kind of controlled fall.

What had been a soft whisper that she mistook for wind grew louder. She came out of the clouds and the snow had disappeared and she recognized that whispering as a swollen stream. She could see it, a thousand feet below, winding through the canyon—chocolate milk streaked with white water.

She ran again, the noise of the rapids getting louder, her ears popping.

When she finally saw them, she felt for the first time in days that she might survive.

A quarter of a mile down-canyon, Jerrod's Bronco, the llama trailer, and the faded blue speck of Scott's Suburban stood parked where they'd been left four days ago, in a meadow by the road.

• • •

It was getting dark when Abigail picked up the trail two hundred feet above the road to Silverton. She followed it down five switchbacks before it straightened out, leveled off, and emerged from the spruce forest into a meadow.

She broke into a run, tears streaming down her face, and not only from the pain of her tenderized feet but from relief, too.

She collapsed in the grass on the driver's side of the Suburban, gulping lungfuls of air, every cell in her body screaming out in riotous protest at the last seventeen miles of abuse.

She looked across the meadow to where the trail entered the forest, her eyes slanting up through the spruce to the first switchback, then following it to the next bend.

Just before the third turn, she saw movement—a man jogging down through the trees.

She reached into the right side pocket of her parka. No keys. Left pocket. Not there, either. "What the hell did I—" She remembered, unzipped the parka and the breast pocket of her fleece jacket, jammed her hand inside, willing herself not to watch him come.

The third key she tried unlocked the driver's door. The rusted Suburban had been outfitted with knobby off-road tires, and Abigail had to step two and a half feet up to climb behind the wheel. She shut the door, slid the seat forward, and slipped the same key that had opened the door into the ignition. *If this were a movie, the car wouldn't start,* she thought.

The engine roared to life.

Through the front passenger window, she saw Quinn rounding the final switchback.

Abigail released the emergency brake and shifted into drive, her foot burning as she pressed the accelerator. The Suburban lurched forward over the uneven ground, rattling and rocking, the big tires rolling over rocks, through shallow ditches slicked with runoff.

She screamed when the bullet passed through the glass beside her ear, felt the spray of shards as they embedded themselves in the left side of her face, cracks spiderwebbing through the windshield.

She ducked and drove onto the road as another round chinked through her door and punctured the ashtray, the accompanying report drowned out in the noisy growl of the Suburban's 410 engine.

Where rocks didn't jut out of the dirt, the narrow road was washboarded. She looked down, found the off-road stick shift. *Good,* she thought. Scott had left the four-wheel high engaged.

Pain raged through her foot, up into her tailbone, raindrops plopping on the windshield.

Thunder dropped above the engine, clouds darkening, snow mixing in.

Abigail began to cry.

• • •

A half hour later, she flipped on the headlights.

Rain fell through the beams.

She kept looking in the rearview mirror, watching for another pair of high beams to punch through all that darkness, the Suburban jittery and bouncing like it might shake itself to pieces. She'd never driven such a rough road, and twice she took a turn too fast, nearly launched off the shoulder into the canyon.

After eight miles, the bumps smoothed out, and she could keep the speed at a steady thirty-five miles per hour.

A mile later, it turned to pavement, and she gunned the Suburban to forty-five.

Her ears popped.

She crested a hill, and below in the rainy gloom, a collection of lights appeared, and a green road sign flashed by:

WELCOME TO SILVERTON
POP. 473 ELEV. 9318

She veered through a hairpin turn, straightened out onto Greene Street, drove over a bridge that spanned all twenty feet of Cement Creek, and eased onto the brake pedal.

To her immediate right stood the San Juan County Courthouse, gold-domed and surmounted by a clock tower.

Ahead, streetlamps lined either side of Silverton's main thoroughfare, each illuminating spheres of slushy rain. It was a quarter past seven on a raw Thursday night, and with the buildings dark and scarcely a single occupied parking space as far as she could see, it seemed the town had already gone to sleep.

She drove a few blocks past rows of refurbished Victorian-style buildings that would have looked like something out of a Western, if not for their

ostentatious paint schemes—Silverton Clinic, Fred Wolfe Memorial Carriage House, a Church of Christ no bigger than a trailer, Silverton City Hall, Wyman Hotel, Pride of the West Restaurant, Rocky Mountain Funnel Cakes and Café, Blue Raven Fine Arts, Outdoor World.

The saloons and brothels had long since been replaced with trendy coffeehouses, galleries, ice-cream, candy, and gift shops. There was even a photography studio where they would doll you up like a cowboy or a whore and take your portrait, so when you went home, you could show your friends you'd been in the real West.

The West for tourists, she thought. You could probably order an appletini from one of the bars and stand a good chance of not being shot between the eyes.

At the corner of Greene and Twelfth, Abigail pulled into a parking space in front of the Grand Imperial, a three-story white-brick hotel with lavender trim, red brick chimneys, and topped by a row of shed-roofed dormers.

She killed the engine, climbed down onto the street, and glass fell out of the window when she slammed shut the Suburban's heavy door.

Beyond the ticking of the engine and the splatter of icy rain, Silverton stood silent.

Looking through the windows, she could see into the lobby of the hotel, where a clerk read a paperback behind the front desk.

As she started toward the entrance, she heard the groan of a revving engine.

At the north end of town, headlights appeared.

1893

85

Milton wiped his mouth and shuddered. After a day of deadpan drinking in the Blair Street saloons, he'd just aired the paunches into a snowbank, noting bitterly to himself that he'd never touched liquor prior to coming west.

As he staggered up Twelfth Street toward the boardinghouse, even the glow from all that rotgut wasn't sufficient to ward off the loneliness or the early-evening chill.

The lights of Silverton had begun to wink on.

He passed a butcher shop, a grub house, a pharmacy, a Chinese laundry, and was thinking of his wife and son back in Missouri and choking on guilt, having had his thorn sucked that morning by a whore named Maribell, when he tripped over something and tumbled into the snow.

He sat up and scratched the ice out of his beard and shook his head in an attempt to right the spinning world. When at last he did, he found himself sprawled near the entrance to the Grand Imperial Hotel.

It took some doing, but he managed to regain his feet.

"Son of a bitch."

He stared down at what had toppled him—some bindle-stiff whore in a white cape, either drunker than he was or stone-dead, lying facedown in the filthy snow.

• • •

Voices washed out, distant.

"You a diploma doc?"

"I'm the best chance she's got of … This a whore?"

"I don't know. What's it matter?"

"I don't treat whores. Find Dr. Stout. He makes the rounds on Blair—"

"I'm not certain she's a—"

"You know how many dead prostitutes he's seen since Christmas Eve? Five. Had to pump the stomachs of seven. They all take to suicide this time of year. Morphine. Carbolic acid for the more desperate."

"She ain't poisoned. She's frozed."

"Or maybe she's poisoned *and* froze."

“She needs your help, whichever the—”

“Should it come to my attention she eats cock for her bed and supper, you can double the amounts on my fee bill.”

“All right. She gonna die?”

“More than likely.”

• • •

A man stood hunched over at the foot of the bed, chewing on a stogie, and even through skewed vision, she could see his smooth-shaven face glistening with sweat, his arm jerking back and forth, shirtsleeves rolled up, arms red to the elbows, the air pungent with the charred reek of friction—steel grinding through rotted bone.

“Goddamn it, she’s coming to.”

A washrag covered her face and she thought she would smother.

• • •

She came around, thinking of the little girl lost in the slide, and the first thing her eyes locked upon was a small man sitting at her bedside in a rocking chair and snoring, the wiry black hairs of his unkempt beard trembling with each exhalation.

She lay in a twin bed with a wrought-iron frame, positioned between two windows in a bare-bones room—hardwood floor and floral-patterned wallpaper adorned with three awful paintings.

The air held a red tint, and her eyes burned.

She felt feverish, her throat raw from the ether.

On the floor beside the rocking chair lay a Kelly pad and a washtub full of crimson water, out of which poked the handles of two knives and a bone saw.

She tugged at the cover and it slipped up her legs, her feet itching despite the fact that they weren’t where they should be.

She glanced at the washtub, back at the bandaged, leaking stubs below her knees.

Her throat made a birdlike sound, and her eyes shone with tears.

A door opened and shut.

She wiped her eyes, glimpsed a tall, smooth-shaven man, his brown hair pushed high off his forehead in wavy, gravity-defying tangles.

He knelt down to inspect the bandages.

“I know this must be a shock for you,” he said, glancing up. Lana felt a surge of modesty, realizing she wore only underpinnings. “You were found outside tonight by that gentleman”—he motioned to the small man still sleeping in the rocker—”unconscious in the snow. You’re in room two oh three, on the second floor of the Grand Imperial Hotel in Silverton, Colorado.”

He stood up, his white dress shirt specked with blood, forearms stained.

“I’m Dr. Julius Primack, by the way.”

Lana’s lower lip quivered. Last thing she recalled was emerging snowblind from a stand of aspen into a valley, seeing buildings in the distance, smelling wood smoke.

“You know that man?”

She shook her head.

“He saved your life, covered your medical expenses thus far. You have any money?”

She nodded.

“Reason I ask is because there’s more work to be done. Your right arm’s fine, but I need to take that left one off below the elbow.”

She shook her head, began to cry.

“Mortification has occurred. You smell that? It’s already begun to rot. I don’t know how it froze so hard, but it did. I charge fifty dollars to amputate an appendage, and if you choose not to make this gentleman pay for the legs, we’re talking a hundred and fifty dollars total. Can you cover that?”

Lana glanced down at her arms, her right a vital pink, her left the blackish purple of a ripe plum.

“Can you pay?”

She nodded.

“You haven’t said a word. What are you, mute?”

Lana opened her mouth wide.

As the doctor leaned in, she saw that his face had been horribly scarred from some long-ago bout of smallpox. He smelled of stale cigar smoke.

“Maybe you aren’t a whore after all. Where the hell’s your tongue?”

Lana lifted her right arm, held her thumb, fore, and middle fingers together.

“You can write?”

She nodded.

He placed his ear to her chest for a moment, then sat up, flattened his palm against her forehead.

“Time is not on our side. That arm isn’t off by daybreak, the infection’ll hit your bloodstream. Then it won’t matter what I cut off.”

Dr. Primack walked over to a dresser and returned to the bed, where he eased down beside Lana and opened his satchel—a black pebbled-leather handcase lined with chamois and brimming with scalpels, a stethoscope, pessaries, a catheter, forceps, a splint, and various bottles containing tonics, bitters, and tinctures.

As he withdrew a brown feather-bound journal, the man who’d been snoozing in the rocker rubbed his eyes and sat up.

“How she doin, Doc?”

Dr. Primack shook his head and pulled a bottle out of the handcase, unscrewed the cap.

“Laudanum,” he said. “It’ll dull the edge on the pain.”

Lana swallowed two mouthfuls, and then the doctor placed a Waterman fountain pen between the fingers of her right hand and opened the journal in her lap to a blank page.

“What’s your name?”

She wrote: Lana Hartman.

“You live in Silver—”

She stopped him with a raised hand, wrote: From Abandon. Preacher locked town in mine. Everyone dying.

He stared hard into her eyes, as if attempting to discern whether the claim was valid or just the raving of a madwoman.

“You stretching the blanket for me?”

She scrawled: I’m not crazy.

The doctor sighed.

“Why’d he do it?”

She shrugged, wrote: Went crazy. Locked gold in, too.

He whispered, “How much?”

Whole string of burros to carry it.

Dr. Primack stood up, said, “Excuse me, Miss Hartman,” and turned to the man in the rocker.

“Milton, could I speak with you in private?”

• • •

Lana craned her neck to peek out one of the windows beside her bed. The darkness was riddled and blurred with flecks of light like some syphilitic rash upon the town, the nefarious amusement of Blair Street and its salas and silver exchanges unrestrained even at this hour—pianos, dogs barking, aggressive laughter, breaking glass.

I’m not supposed to die in this town. Please God, *she prayed.*

The door opened and the doctor walked in, alone.

He came and sat down on the bed and repositioned the pen between her fingers.

“How long have they been locked in?”

She wrote: Since Christmas night.

“Do they have food? Water?”

She shook her head.

“Where is this mine, exactly?”

She was becoming light-headed, and twice the pen slipped from her grasp and she had to start over, make the words legible. She finally wrote: *Above town on west slope, I think. Sorry I feel so poorly. Bring my cape.*

Dr. Primack looked annoyed as he rose from the bed and lifted the ruined, sodden garment from the board floor beside the dresser. He brought it over, said, “Why do you want this?”

Lana reached for it, her right hand slipping into the inner pocket, grasping the key.

“What’s that open?”

She wrote: *The mine. You have to get them out. There’s children. Get the sheriff.* “Of course.” He took it out of her hand, stroked the key’s long stem, its teeth. “I should operate immediately.”

• • •

Lana was crying as Dr. Primack handed Milton the cloth, standing poised beside her left arm.

“I’ll have it off in two minutes.”

She stared at the finely serrated blade of the amputation saw dripping red water onto the bed, the collection of knives laid out on the sheets, the bottle

of ether, the Kelly pad under her arm, the washtub glistening red under the electric light.

Though she was fading from the big dose of laudanum, her heart still reeled.

“Go ahead, Milton.”

Here came the cloth, sharp bite of ether in the back of her throat, and then she floated in a warm gray sea, flanked by swirling voices.

• • •

“Damn, that was fast.”

“Hold the cloth to her mouth.”

“She ain’t awake.”

“Do what I tell you or get the fuck out.”

• • •

Lana smiled, gleaming with morphine, and still in that same bed in that same room in the Grand Imperial, only now it was filled with the natural light of morning and noise from the street below.

She thought, *I’ve survived*.

Beautiful Dr. Primack stood at the foot of her bed, speaking with another man—round and gray-bearded, holding a bowler against his thigh, a shiny object catching early sunlight pinned to his black frock coat.

When she tried to lift her right hand to catch their attention, she felt the straps binding both arms to her sides.

She made a noise with her throat.

The men quit talking and looked at her. They walked over, sat on either side of the bed.

The older, bearded man ran his fingers through his thinning hair, his dirty nails leaving fleeting white trails in the ripples of his rosy scalp.

“Miss, I’m Sheriff Donaway, and Dr. Primack has explained to me the tragic predicament.”

Thank God, she thought.

“He’s had to take off both legs and arms, and arrangements are being made to transport you on the narrow-gauge to Mercy Hospital in Durango.”

She looked up at Dr. Primack, who watched her with something that might have been mistaken for compassion.

The doctor turned back the cover so Lana could see the bloody, bandaged stubs below both elbows.

The morphine elation fading.

My right arm was fine. You told me it was.

“I understand this is most upsetting,” he said, “but there was nothing I could do. Both arms had sustained severe damage. You’d be dead by now if I hadn’t taken them off.”

She opened her mouth. *Why haven’t you told him about Abandon?* But it came out as little more than the ramblings of an idiot.

“Try to settle down, Miss Hartman,” the doctor said. “You’re in a fragile state.”

They’re dying.

“Please, Miss Hartman.”

Why are you doing this?

“Can you give her something, Doc?”

“I sure can.”

Dr. Primack hurried over to his hand case, which was sitting on the dresser.

She heard the words in her head as clearly as she used to speak them, but the room resonated with only an ugly, tongueless noise.

“Listen,” the sheriff said, and he placed his hand on her shoulder. “Dr. Primack has also divulged to me your mental condition.”

Bottles clinked in Primack’s hand case.

“You’re going to recover in Durango.”

The doctor was coming back now.

“I have a connection with the asylum in Pueblo.”

Primack unscrewed the cap, tilting the bottle’s open mouth onto a white cloth.

“I’m certain I can get you admitted. They’ll help you there, Miss Hartman. Make the life God has seen fit to afflict you with as dignified and comfortable as can be hoped for.”

Look in his notebook. For Chrissakes.

“You’re lucky to have fallen under the care of Primack.”

She screamed and writhed, but the restraints held.

“Lana.” The doctor spoke softly into her ear. “I want you to know I’m waiving my fee for the amputations. Now don’t fight it.”

The ether-soaked cloth descended toward her face.
“Just close your eyes and take a long, deep breath.”

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The lobby of the Grand Imperial stood accented by objects, the assemblage of which felt more like a cliché than a throwback to Silverton's boom years—burgundy floral-print wallpaper, tin ceiling, chandelier, a stodgy black safe near the front desk, a pair of wall clocks, a grand piano, a sculpture of four grinning outlaws on horseback firing their revolvers into the air, and a large-scale portrait of a whore hanging over one of two high-backed leather sofas that comprised the sitting area.

Abigail reached the front desk.

"I need help. Call the police."

"There's no police here."

"What*?*"

"Just a sheriff."

"Give me the phone."

"Are you a guest with us?"

"Are you *joking*—"

"The courtesy phone is only for guests of the GI."

Abigail placed the young woman at sixteen or seventeen. She sat behind an expansive antique desk, a horror novel clutched in her left hand. She was sucking a green lollipop that wafted a bizarrely scented amalgamation of apples and whiskey.

Abigail read the clerk's name tag. "Listen, Tracy. A man has chased me out of the mountains, and he's coming to kill me. Think we could make an exception tonight?"

The desk clerk laid the paperback down beside a keyboard and withdrew the lollipop from green-ringed lips, making eye contact with Abigail for the first time.

"Fine."

There was the screech of brakes, and, glancing in the mirror behind the desk, Abigail caught the reflection of the large front window that looked out onto Greene Street, saw an old beater of a Bronco slide into the Suburban's rear bumper—a slight collision that barely shook the vehicle.

"Is that him?" the clerk asked.

"Does the sheriff live in town?"

“Yeah, end of Fourteenth.”

“Which way is that?”

A door slammed.

“Two blocks north.”

Boots clomped on the sidewalk.

“Tracy, get down behind the desk and keep quiet.”

Quinn stepped under the awning, and as he opened the door and started into the foyer, Abigail bolted up a carpeted staircase under a sign that read TO THE ROOMS.

She turned left, climbed twenty steps, already breathless.

In the lobby, a man yelled, *“Where’d she go?”*

She reached the second floor.

Left or right?

She went left, then right, heard footfalls racing up the steps behind her as she came to an intersection of corridors and stairs.

Left, right, or climb?

She turned left, sprinting down a hall—pink walls, white trim, white doors, squeakiest floor she’d ever encountered, past room 201, under a chandelier with two fried bulbs, room 202, then a series of black-and-white photographs of old steam engines, room 203, right turn, long, narrow hallway: 214, 215, 216, 217.

It dead-ended at a door with a sign under the metal handle: DO NOT OPEN. FIRE DOOR ONLY. WILL SET OFF ALARM.

Bursting through into icy rain, the alarm wailing, Abigail stood on a fire escape that overlooked a sparsely populated parking lot, the globules of slush glittering under the yellow streetlamps like jewels on the hoods and windshields.

She glanced back through the glass-paned door, didn’t see him coming, prayed he’d taken a wrong turn in the maze of corridors.

She dropped to her hands and knees, lowering herself down the slippery ladder, and as her feet touched the pavement, the fire door banged open above her.

She crawled into the shadow of a nearby Dumpster. The ladder’s metal rungs resonated under the impact of his boots.

He hit the ground.

From where she crouched, she could only see his breath pluming in the floodlights.

She reached down, felt the hard bulge of the Ruger in the side pocket of her jacket, but it was zipped in and she didn't want to risk the noise.

Ice pinged the Dumpster's metal lid.

Quinn stepped a little farther out into the parking lot. Abigail wondered if the shadow where she squatted was as dark as she thought.

He stood there for some time, motionless.

The floodlights cut off, and she couldn't see him anymore.

When they came on thirty seconds later, Quinn was gone.

Abigail got up and jogged through the parking lot, away from the illumination of streetlamps, the blaring alarm, into a dirt road cratered with puddles icing over.

Silverton at this hour consisted of cold and darkness and the isolated lights of little Victorian houses, some run-down and vacant since the mining bust, others polished up and slathered with bright paint by mountain-worshiping Yuppies.

She ran up Reese, blinded by sweat and freezing water that trailed down the back of her neck and along the curved ridge of her spine.

Somewhere in the dark, a truck engine mumbled.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw twin light beams slash through the pouring rain, the Bronco speeding up Twelfth Street.

She ran harder, splashing through puddles crusted with paper-thin ice.

A dog yapped at her through the window of a nearby house, and several blocks away, the courthouse clock tolled 8:00 P.M.

One street up, the Bronco bounced along a dirt road. She saw it streak between the houses, make a right turn onto Thirteenth, then haul ass for a block before initiating another hard right, the high beams now blasting head-on, accompanied by the roaring engine.

She dived off the street, her head just missing a mailbox, then flattened herself in wet grass against a chain-link fence as the Bronco screamed past, mud slinging into her hair, slopping down all over her clothes.

Abigail waited, listening to the engine dwindle up the road and the distant fire alarm and the deep, almost imperceptible static of the Animas River on the opposite side of town, running low in advance of winter.

When the Bronco turned onto another street, she struggled to her feet and wiped the mud out of her eyes and went on, soon crossing the intersection of Reese and Thirteenth, every footfall sending new shoots of pain up into her tailbone.

Another minute brought her to Fourteenth, where she veered left at an abandoned brick building and ran for one long block past decrepit white Victorians and a double-wide into Snowden, another muddy road, rougher and more washboarded than Reese.

She looked around—just the faint drone of the fire alarm, like some psychotic mewling cat, and shards of house light, the air permeated with the rain-mellowed odor of wood smoke, and thirty yards on, at the end of a gravel drive, blades of porch light lying in triangles upon a Ford Expedition with a modest suspension lift, giant tires, a wench, and a light bar mounted on the roof.

Two blocks down, the Bronco turned onto Fourteenth, barreling toward her.

She wept from the pain as she staggered up the drive, passing the driver's door of the Expedition—gold-emblazoned with SAN JUAN COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT.

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Abigail reached the front porch of the Victorian—cherry, with yellow trim, Tibetan prayer flags strung between the gutter and a cluster of skinny aspen, a circular stained-glass window on the second floor, backlit with firelight, chairs in the yard fashioned out of old skis.

She pounded on the front door and, looking through the inset of curtained glass, saw a light flick on, heard footsteps crossing a hardwood floor that squeaked and groaned.

A bolt turned, a chain slid out, flopped against the door frame, hinges creaking, and there stood that petite, beautiful woman who'd hassled Scott over his fishing license four days ago at the trailhead, though no braided pigtails this time. No Stetson or parka. Just a woman in a pink satin nightgown and sheepskin slippers, hair pinned up with chopsticks, breath spiced with the faintest glimmer of vodka.

"Help you with something?" she asked.

Abigail's knees buckled. She sat down hard on the porch.

"What's wrong?"

Abigail couldn't speak, just pointed back toward Fourteenth, but there were no oncoming headlights, only streetlamps and darkness.

The sheriff squatted down in the threshold of the door.

"You were with that group headed out to Abandon. Last Sunday, right?"

"Yes."

"Your face is frostbit. What happened?"

"Please, just … get me inside."

The sheriff helped her to stand, then, with her arm around her waist, walked Abigail into the house and shut the door.

"Do the locks," Abigail said.

As the sheriff relocked the door, Abigail tried to unzip her muddy jacket, but her hands trembled too much to grasp the zipper.

"Let me help with that," the sheriff said.

"Thank you. What's your name?"

"Jennifer."

"I'm Abigail."

Abigail pulled her arms out of the sleeves, and Jennifer took the jacket and hung it from the coatrack. Then she guided Abigail through the foyer, past the staircase, and up a dark hallway into the kitchen.

“Here, sit down.” She pulled a chair back from a small table and Abigail collapsed onto the seat.

“Could I have some water?”

“Of course.” Jennifer opened a cabinet and took down a glass, filled it at the tap.

Abigail glanced around the kitchen, a peculiar mix of new and old—Sub-Zero fridge, granite countertops, an old gas stove salted with rust, an ancient faucet. On a wooden shelf above the sink, she spotted an array of empty Grey Goose bottles and antique bottles that a century ago had contained bitters and tonics, and a clear flower vase full of stained wine corks.

Jennifer set the glass down on the table and returned to the sink and filled a pot with water. Abigail caught a whiff of propane, heard the gas ignite. Jennifer sat down across from her.

“I know you’re tired and hurting, but why don’t you try to tell me what happened out there.”

The heat from a wood-burning stove slithered in from the living room.

“They’re all dead,” she whispered. “Except my father, who’s trapped in a cave.”

“How’d they die?”

The cold had scrambled and clouded her thoughts, and she tried to decant the sequence of events, but the days and nights kept mixing and running into one another and reversing, like the warped memory of a fever dream, several versions of the last seventy-two hours emerging, until she couldn’t separate with certainty exactly what had happened when and to whom and the horrible chronology of it all.

She shook with chills as she attempted to piece it back together, the events crystallizing and falling into order the more she talked.

But the version she told took a departure once they’d been locked inside the mountain. It was only a long-forgotten mine, and empty at that.

No bones, no gold, no revelation.

“Here, get this in you.”

Jennifer set a big steaming mug of tea on the table before Abigail, who cupped her hands to the warm ceramic and left them there until her fingers burned.

“How long has your father been alone in the cave.”

“Almost two days.”

“How much water did you leave him with?”

“We ran out.”

“I’ll call search-and-rescue, get that ball rolling. Go on, drink your tea. You’ll feel better.”

Jennifer walked out of the kitchen, and Abigail heard the creak of her footsteps ascending the stairs. She raised the mug to her lips and sipped the tea—piping hot, peppermint with a harsh, bitter bite—wondered if the sheriff had sneaked in a bit of Grey Goose for good measure, hoped so.

Her feet ached. She set the tea on a place mat and reached down and pulled on the double-knotted laces of her left boot. The knot slipped. She tugged out the tongue and winced as she slid her heel out of the boot, the wool hiking sock cold, damp, and pink with blood.

Abigail loved her feet—small, feminine, exuding a slender, proportionate beauty her friends openly envied. These shredded, swollen blobs of flesh did not belong to her. They looked more like battered cod, blanched and translucent, with silver dollar-size blisters on her heels and ankles that peeled back, revealing raw skin the color of watermelon pulp.

She got up, had to walk on the balls of her feet to bypass the excruciating pain.

Being down there alone unnerved her, though she still caught fragments of Jennifer’s voice upstairs. She took her mug of tea and limped out of the kitchen in search of a bathroom, came instead into a small office with a scratched-up desk, which faced a window. The desk barely provided the surface area to house its computer, printer, and fax machine.

Peering through the beaded glass, Abigail saw that the rain had changed over to snow.

Way off in all that darkness, a barb of red light slanted up and left through her field of vision and she thought she was hallucinating until she pegged it for the taillights of a car climbing the steep grade south out of Silverton toward Molas Pass.

Spider plants in need of watering hung from the ceiling, a pair of leather snowshoes from one wall, and her eyes fixed upon a framed photomontage beside them of jagged mountains under the heading COLORADO'S 54 FOURTEENERS.

She sipped her tea. Beside the desk, two unfinished pine bookcases almost touched the ceiling, but instead of books, they contained relics from the past—rusted railroad spikes, an old burro's shoe, pitons and a pair of crampons from the forties. Perhaps most fascinating, the middle two shelves of each bookcase displayed photographs of Silverton.

On one side stood framed photos of the present-day town and the buildings of Greene and Blair streets—the courthouse, city hall, the Grand Imperial—all set against the backdrop of mountainsides blazing with aspen and blue sky the purity of which could exist only above nine thousand feet in the Colorado Rockies, and there were photos of the Durango and Silverton Narrow-Gauge Railroad, the train having stopped to unload at Twelfth Street on a summer day, tourists leaning out of the gondola cars, smiling and waving, thrilled to spend a few hours in this romanticized mining town, to lunch in remodeled saloons and brothels, watch staged gunfights, have portraits taken in old-West costumes, children destined to return home with cowboy hats and six-shooter cap guns, tortured parents having to suffer their kids saying "Howdy, pardner" and "Get along, now" for the foreseeable future.

On the opposing shelves stood more Silverton photographs, these all in black-and-white, little windows to the past: a burro train standing in late-nineteenth-century Greene Street, the mule skinners staring dour-faced at the photographer. Soot-blackened miners and whores and suited gold and silver kings in a saloon, everyone raising beer glasses and tumblers, and not a smile to be found under all those handlebar mustaches. The railroad in winter, tracks framed by fifteen-foot walls of snow, and five bundled men with iced mustaches standing in front of a steam engine's cattle guard, shovels in hand.

But what caught her interest more than anything were the portraits of people long dead, their faces stoic, expressionless: a woman who might've been her age, carrying in her eyes the world-weariness of a refugee. A white-bearded gentleman, ragged bowler perched on his head, whose eyes

betrayed their longing to cut loose a smile, despite having to sit still for the long exposure.

She considered all the photographs in her studio—family and friends at weddings, graduations, vacations, Christmases—and couldn't recall a single picture where someone wasn't smiling their heart out, thought how strange it would be if people in modern times never grinned for the camera.

Going solely on photographs, historians in the next century might mistake her world for a happy place, just as she'd always assigned misery and hardship to the past, prejudiced by a few grim portraits.

Abigail noted that she felt much better, the pain receding from her feet as she inspected the last portrait—a black-and-white shot of a young man with hair so unkempt that it struck her as contemporary, and for all its gravity-defying waves, might've run two hundred dollars, not including product, in a Manhattan salon.

The face that wild hair sat upon was handsome but uniformly pocked with tiny colorless indentations, so that he looked less like a live human being, more like a Seurat Pointillism.

The portrait's frame rested upon a brown leather-bound book, stiff and dry, so old that as she lifted it to her face and inhaled the smell, she couldn't detect even the faintest odor of tannins or glue.

She opened it to the first page, which contained six words handwritten in elaborate, perfect script: *The Journal of Dr. Julius Primack.*

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She thumbed the brittle pages, coming midway through to handwriting that looked different from the doctor's—smaller, less methodical, and nearly illegible, like it had been scrawled under duress.

There were eight lines in haphazard succession down the middle of the page, the first of which read *Lana Hartman.*

"You found it."

The sheriff stood in the archway adjoining the kitchen and the office, and Abigail couldn't exactly nail it down, but her posture evinced tension—Jennifer's arms hanging at her sides, knees slightly bent, her body coiled as if for a race or a fight.

And Abigail felt different—seismic shifts in the unavowed frequencies. She was edgy, a little nauseous, her awareness heightened, and she realized it wasn't that her body didn't ache anymore—she just cared less and less with each passing moment.

"You're a historian, too?" Abigail asked.

"You could say that." Jennifer walked into the office and stood beside Abigail at the bookshelf. "This guy"—she touched the portrait of the young man with the ruined face—"came out to Silverton from Chicago in 1891 with investment money. Lost it all on poorly chosen claims in less than a year."

"But he stayed."

"Julius had studied a little medicine in the mid-eighties, and since you didn't actually have to have a diploma to be a doctor where they were in high demand, he started a practice, kept prospecting on the side. If you read his notes"—Jennifer pulled the journal out of Abigail's hands, placed it back carefully under the photograph—"it becomes clear he was a very driven but very frustrated man."

"Why frustrated?"

"He became obsessed with finding some gold that went missing in Abandon, thought he knew where it was, that he had the key that would open this secret mine. But he could never find it. He went crazy, shot himself in 1924."

"Why do you have his picture and journal? Are you studying—"

“I’m his great-granddaughter. My brother and I are fourth-generation Silverton Primacks.”

The sheriff slipped out of focus, and Abigail had to rub her eyes to bring her back.

“What’s wrong?” Jennifer asked.

“I don’t know … it’s weird.” It wasn’t a bad feeling, just a sudden, blissful calm, and the only thing that unnerved Abigail was how fast it had bullied its way in.

Jennifer said, “That’s probably the Percoset I crushed up in your tea.”

Abigail’s heart hammered so hard, she thought it would explode, then realized that the beating hadn’t originated within her. Someone had knocked at the front door.

Jennifer had left the room.

Abigail looked down, saw a puddle and four pieces of ceramic on the hardwood floor.

She almost fell moving past the stainless-steel refrigerator, braced herself against the kitchen table, which turned over—place settings, her glass of water, and a vase of plastic lilies crashing to the floor.

She sat down on the tile.

In the foyer, Jennifer reached the front door and pulled it open.

A man loomed in the porchlight. Abigail knew him from somewhere. His shoulder-length brown hair was tied up in a ponytail, his silver-and-black down jacket dusted with snow.

He wrapped his arms around Jennifer, nothing remotely sexual or romantic in the embrace, the energy reflective of close friends or siblings.

He said, “We did it, Jen.”

Abigail leaned against the refrigerator, her head humming as she watched Jennifer redo the locks.

The mosaic of pastel-colored tiles ensnared Abigail’s attention, and the next time she looked up, that tall man stood at the sink, washing his hands.

Her eyes slammed shut, and when they opened again, her face lay pressed against the cold tile and the kitchen table had been righted and the sheriff and that familiar man sat across from each other.

“… this storm, we won’t be able to get back to Abandon until next summer. I told you it might come to …” His voice left audible trails, as if he were speaking in triplicate.

Abigail had been stoned before, drunk, even took Ecstasy a couple years back at an ill-advised rave in the Meatpacking District. This was nothing like that. She didn't feel euphoric, just tranquil and dreamy and wise. On some disassociated level, she understood the danger, but it was knowledge without emotion or investment, no more upsetting than hearing of a stranger's death on the evening news.

"I fucking hate this." The sheriff's voice.

Somewhere in the kitchen, a crow squawked nine times.

"This isn't the first blood spilled for those bricks. But we do this right? Finish it? Maybe it's the last. You thought of it that way?"

"I don't know if I'm wired for—"

"Remember what you said to me four days ago? 'There're people going into Abandon, and I think they're going for our gold.' You told me, 'Don't let it happen.' "

She went out of time again, wading amid thoughts jumbled and irrelevant and absurd, vaguely aware that she needed to bring herself down, untangle her mind from this exquisite high.

"… four-hundred-foot drop off Peace Falls. There'll be no chance of anyone finding her until … Jesus, Jen, I told you to get her loaded."

Abigail tried to sit up.

"I spiked her tea with thirty milligrams of oxycodone."

If Abigail didn't move her head, she could actually bring their faces into focus.

"What'd she say, Quinn?"

"I couldn't tell."

This time, she got the words out, though they slurred against her thick tongue, sounded as muddled as everything else. "Why'd you drug me?"

Jennifer said, "Just to help with your pain. Nice, isn't it?"

"Lovely." Abigail stared at the man at the table, her mouth and eyes gone dry. "I know you."

"Yes, we've met."

Abigail managed to sit up against the cabinets, had to close her eyes to shut out the chaos of light and noise.

"In the mine?"

"No, Packer's mansion. But I did lock you and your father and June into the mine. More than a little surprised you found a way out."

“Oh, that’s right.” She tried to suppress a giggle. It all seemed so terribly funny. Then it hit her. “Jennifer,” she said, “there were gold bars in that mine. I’ll bet that’s what your—what was he?”

“Great-grandfather.”

“What he was looking for. I can show you—Wait.” She pointed at Quinn. “He knows. He was there. He had a key. How does he have your great-grandfather’s key?”

Quinn and Jennifer laughed.

Abigail laughed, too, her eyes catching on the clock above the sink, a different bird assigned to each hour.

It read 9:10 P.M.

Impossible. It had been hours since she’d walked into the office and looked at the Silverton photographs and Primack’s journal.

“I need to get going, huh?” Quinn said. “Before this snow gets any deeper.”

“I should go with you. I won’t lie—I don’t want to, but—”

“No, I’ll take care of it. Abigail, wanna go for a ride?”

She thought about it. “Where to?”

“Just up into the mountains a little ways.”

“Why?”

“To meet up with search-and-rescue, so we can get your dad out of the cave.”

She smiled. “Know what I think?”

“What?”

“You don’t mean the words you’re saying.”

“No? Then what do I mean?”

“Something bad.”

Quinn stood up and reached down, grabbed Abigail’s hands and pulled her to her feet.

“Help me get her boots on, Jen. Don’t want her found barefoot.”

“Actually, it doesn’t matter.”

“Sure it does.”

“No, when people get hypothermia, start freezing to death out in the wilderness, they’re often found half-naked. They go out of their mind, think they’re warm, start stripping off layers of clothing. Just leave her boots here. I’ll make sure they disappear.”

“Can you walk, Abigail?”

“Of course I know how to walk.”

She felt weightless on her feet, moving slowly and deliberately out of the kitchen into the hallway. At an ovular mirror, she stopped and regarded herself, leaning in close, her nose flattened against the glass.

“We could still not do this, Quinn.”

“Stop now? After everything I’ve done? No payoff for any of it? That’d be the worst outcome. No, we’re all in.”

Abigail’s pupils had been reduced to grains of black sand.

She turned away from the mirror and continued on toward the front door.

“Jen, this won’t have been worth it … for Julius, for Grandpa, Dad, you and me, if we let the guilt crush us.”

As Abigail reached for the doorknob, she saw her muddy jacket hanging from the coatrack. She lifted it off the hook, kept turning it around, searching for the armholes.

Quinn took it from her, held it by the collar, and Jennifer helped guide her arms into the sleeves.

“Would Dad have taken it this far?”

“Hard to say. We’re doing this for all of them, you know.”

Jennifer unlocked and opened the door and Abigail stepped out onto the porch.

Snow tumbled in the vicinity of distant streetlamps, and Abigail wondered how it could be snowing only in those select globes of light.

“God, it’s beautiful,” the sheriff said.

Abigail found the zippers and worked them open, shoved her hands into the pockets.

They helped her down the steps into snow not quite deep enough to cover the spear tips of the longest grass blades.

“We doing right here?” Jennifer said.

“If you can live with yourself, does it matter?”

“*Can* you?”

“I think so. We just have to forget a few days of questionable behavior.”

They moved down past the grove of baby aspen and the sheriff’s Expedition, gravel crunching under their boots and slippers and Abigail’s bare feet, unfazed by the cold.

They arrived at the Bronco, Quinn already opening the front passenger door.

Abigail stopped at the grille, Jennifer beside her, snow melting on the warmed metal of the hood.

Quinn slapped the roof. “Come on. Get in.”

In the right pocket of her jacket, Abigail’s fingers touched something cool and hard. It took five seconds of feeling it to identify the object, and still she couldn’t think of its name, only its function.

“Jennifer,” she said, “you know, I forgot all about this.”

“What?”

Abigail turned and pressed it into her satin nightgown, then faced Quinn, ears ringing as the sheriff went groaning to her knees, blood sprinkling in the snow.

“You didn’t mean what you said about helping my father, did you? You just want—”

“Abigail, you’re fucked-up on the meds. We’re trying to help you and your father here.”

Jennifer crawled back toward the house, and for a moment, Abigail wondered if maybe Quinn was right.

“You didn’t mean to shoot her, Abigail. Now give me the gun. My sister’s gonna die if we don’t—”

It made a small black spot an inch below Quinn’s right eye.

Blood ran down his cheek.

He reached up and scraped at the hole with his fingernails, like he’d been stung and was trying to dig out the stinger.

Abigail looked back at the Victorian house, where Jennifer had dragged herself up onto the porch and come to an impasse at the front door.

The sheriff cried out, “Oh God!”

“You just shot two people, Abigail Foster,” Abigail told herself.

Snow slanted down through the porch light, Abigail figuring the full thirty milligrams of Percoset must be raging through her, because she was so stoned, so detached, her thoughts derailing and becoming unmanageable again.

She eased down in the gravel and stared at the prayer flags, frosted with snow and flapping in the wind, Silverton all hushed and still.

She was cold and itchy from the opiate, but she didn’t care.

After awhile, she got up and staggered toward the porch, climbed the steps, stopping at the front door.

Jennifer lay on her back in a pond of black blood, her eyes open and glazed, her lips barely moving.

Abigail said, “Your nightgown’s ruined.”

Then she stepped over the sheriff and went inside.

89

The sun had roused Lawrence Kendall from sleep on Wednesday and Thursday, but not on Friday. His third morning in the cave, a noise woke him, his eyes opening to pure black, his head lifting from the folded parka he'd used for a pillow the last three nights, fearing he was hallucinating again, but the sound held strong—the muffled yet unmistakable *whop-whop* of rotors chopping the thin air. He smiled, could have wept. Abby had made it out.

As he felt around on the cold rock for the last functioning light, he wondered why a helicopter would be searching for him after dark, but he instantly dismissed the thought as near-death confusion.

His fingers grazed the straps, and he slipped the headlamp on and twisted the bulb. He dragged Abigail's pack over to the granola-bar wrapper in the middle of the room, which marked the spot under the chimney.

Every time he'd slept, he'd dreamed of this moment, on the brink of deliverance, wondering if the smoke would make it all seventy feet up the chute to the surface, and, if so, whether he could generate a sizable-enough plume with what he had to catch anyone's attention.

As he unzipped Abigail's pack and grabbed the Doubletree matchbook and a handful of paper he'd already torn out of her notepad and balled up in preparation, his eyes fell upon the mound of snow nearby that had undoubtedly fallen from the surface.

The moment he got the paper burning, he'd fill the two water bottles with the snow, maybe have enough willpower to wait, let it turn to delicious slush in the cavern's thirty-seven degrees.

He gathered up the wads of paper and stacked them into a little pyramid before tearing out a match. It ignited on the first strike, the flame motionless in the stagnant room. He held it to the base of the pyramid, got seven pieces lighted before the match burned down to his thumb.

The helicopter sounded closer, Lawrence figuring if he could hear the rotors this well, it must be hovering right over the chimney.

All the paper seemed to combust at once, and the room flared with firelight as a dense cloud of smoke lifted toward the low ceiling, Lawrence

picturing it just missing the hole and diffusing through the room, but this didn’t happen.

In spite of his weakened state, he’d planned and executed perfectly. Like a vacuum, the chimney inhaled the smoke. Lawrence struggled to his feet, neck splitting, head pounding with dehydration as he stared up the chute, watching his precious smoke curl toward the surface.

Far up the shaft, something gleamed in the dimming beam of his lamp. It resembled snow, and the smoke had collided into it and stopped, hanging like mist in a hollow against the ice-plugged opening of the chimney.

The *whop-whop* of the helicopter blades pulsed as loud as he would ever hear them.

It was daylight out there, permanent night in here, and if he couldn’t find his way back to the main cavern, he was going to die.

90

Sunlight streamed through the tall windows with a brilliance that suggested the world outside had turned to glass. Abigail's head throbbed, as if someone had shoved a hot coal deep into the base of her skull, and with the woodstove extinguished, the living room was cold, particularly where she lay shivering on the futon by the window.

She had no idea how she'd come to be in this house. The last piece of memory that felt like solid ground seemed ages ago—driving Scott's Suburban away from the trailhead at dusk. Whatever came after had shattered against the back of her mind, and based on what few frames she'd glimpsed, she didn't want those memories reassembled. Her eyes watered with pain as she eased her weight onto her feet.

The nearest archway opened into a kitchen, and something about the table and the stainless-steel refrigerator and the shelf of bottles over the sink made her nauseous with fear—an inexplicable familiarity.

She limped into the foyer and pulled open the front door to cloudless early-morning cobalt, Silverton buried under a foot of new snow, spruce and aspen in the front yard sagging under the weight, the town silent save the murmur of a snowplow scraping north up Greene Street.

At her feet, a woman dressed only in a pink satin nightgown lay unmoving on her stomach, her skin tinged blue and powdered with snow, her bare legs smeared with blood.

"Oh my God."

• • •

"And then you shot them both," the woman said.

"Yes."

"Because you believed your life was in danger."

"Yes."

"Tell me again why you thought the sheriff of Silverton and her brother wanted to kill you?"

• • •

"You're looking at me like you don't believe me."

“It’s not that we don’t believe—”

“Then what?”

“Ms. Foster, we’ve got the sheriff and her brother dead here in town, and you’re telling us there’re six more bodies in the backcountry, most of which we won’t be able to locate until sometime next summer when the snow breaks, and forget the small concern that none of this jives with the Jen Primack I’ve known and worked with for three years. Look, I know you’ve been through quite an ordeal, but for a small-time undersheriff in a sleepy town like Silverton, this is a helluva lot to choke down.”

• • •

When Abigail awoke, they were sitting at the foot of her bed, whispering. She shut her eyes and eavesdropped on a debate concerning the merits of parallel versus telemark turns in champagne powder.

Silverton’s size didn’t warrant a hospital, so the undersheriff had put Abigail up in the Grand Imperial for the night and asked two nurses from San Juan County public Health to check in on her every few hours.

She liked the undersheriff, Hans, a tall, lanky man in the neighborhood of thirty, who looked more like a snowboard instructor than a lawman—longhaired, bearded, and with a tattoo of a rock-climbing skeleton inked into the skin of his left forearm, just visible where he’d rolled up the sleeve of his khaki button-up shirt.

The special agent with the Forest Service made her nervous. She couldn’t recall the redhead’s name, but despite her rustic wardrobe, she managed to exude the cool, impassive confidence of a fed. And she’d hardly asked Abigail a thing, letting Hans lob questions while she leaned back in her chair in her muddy hiking boots, jeans, and down vest, not even bothering to veil her scrutiny and suspicion.

The special agent cut her eyes at Abigail.

“She’s awake.”

They dragged their chairs over into patches of afternoon sunlight that spilled in through the second-floor windows.

“How you feeling?” the undersheriff asked.

“All right.”

Hans leaned forward in the chair, clasped his hands together.

“Search-and-rescue just got back a half hour ago. You might’ve heard the helicopter.”

“They didn’t find my father.”

“They spent forty-five minutes hovering over the mountainside you think you came out on, with two men combing the area with binoculars.”

“I told you: There was a chimney I climbed out—”

“I believe you, Abigail. Thing is, that’s steep terrain up there. They spotted numerous avalanches, and they’re thinking a slide may have swept down the mountain at some point in the last twenty-four hours, buried the opening to the chimney.”

“So they’ve given up?”

“No, of course not. But there’s another storm coming in tonight, blizzard warnings already up, so our window for finding your father is shrinking.”

Abigail glanced at the special agent, could have sworn she caught a glint of compassion through the federal facade. “Maybe my father left that chimney room, tried to find his way back to the cavern where we first entered.”

“Okay, even assuming he was able to find his way back, this morning an avalanche swept down that hillside where you say you entered the cave. So wouldn’t the entrance be buried? And as you said, it was practically impossible to find in dry conditions in broad daylight.”

Abigail shook her head, the tears coming. “He thinks I’m coming for him. Please. Fly me back there. Let me—”

“You honestly believe you can find it?”

“Tell me something, Hans. At what point would you quit looking for your father?”

1893

91

Gloria's head lay in Rosalyn's lap, and she saw that lonely lantern still burning in the middle of the cavern, its flame a little lower than before. The pain had intensified into something like the worst aftereffects of drunkenness she'd ever experienced, her body begging for water as it slowly dried and wilted. *Still alive*, she thought.

Now only moans and soft bellows disturbed the silence, the whimpers of those waiting to die, wanting it more than a drink of water, worse than air.

She looked up at Rosalyn. "Hey," she whispered.

Rosalyn's eyes were open, but the old whore made no answer. She had died while Gloria slept, her mouth inflated by the gigantic tongue, eyelids cracked, blood rolling out of them and down her cheeks. Even while she'd been alive, the absence of water had allowed the mummification of her body to begin, the skin on her face shrinking, lips shriveling, gums blackened, nose withered by half, flesh leathered into the color of ashen purple, with livid streaks where the blood had pooled.

Gloria felt a glimmer of release that her friend had passed.

Again, she obsessed on water, imagined bending down on the shore of Emerald Lake, splashing her face on a bright summer day. She kept replaying the last drink she'd ever taken—snow melted in an iron pot over the fire in their cabin. She could still picture Zeke filling her cup on Christmas morning, remembered how the water had chilled the tin, how when she touched it, her fingerprints had appeared as ghostly, fading condensation on the metal.

The sound of weeping drew her attention. She could barely raise her head from Rosalyn's lap, but when she did, she saw a woman lying ten feet away against the wall of the cavern, touching the blond hair of a boy perhaps two or three years old. The woman had managed to pull him into her body and she kissed his eyebrows and his parched little lips and cried tearlessly. Her husband had died several hours ago and his body lay sprawled nearby on the floor.

The woman rolled her son across the rock toward his father and lay down between them. She held their hands and stared up at the ceiling, her lips moving, and she would not get up again.

Gloria closed her eyes. She thought about her husband and her son, wondered if they could see her dying in this cave.

Then she sensed him, opened her eyes, and across the cavern stood Ezekiel, dapper in that four-button sack coat, his Sunday best, and shining as if illumined by footlights.

Though his lips did not move, she heard his voice perfectly.

He said he was sorry she'd suffered, but that it was almost over, that he'd glimpsed the place where they were going, and there were no words for pain or loss there, and no past.

Our boy's there, *he said,* and I'm told he's been askin for us. There's some kind a beautiful place waitin on our souls, Gloria.

What's he look like, Zeke?

Like Gus, I suppose.

He ain't grown?

I don't know.

Will he always be a little boy, or will he grow up into a man?

I don't know the answer to that.

You go on to him.

I wanna wait for you, Glori.

You won't be waitin long.

June 2010

92

“All right, we’re back on the record oh nine CR one sixty-four, the *People versus Abigail Foster.* Let’s go ahead and bring in the jury.”

• • •

The woman occupied a table near the street, shaded by an umbrella, a copy of the *Times* spread out across her lap.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, she looked up.

• • •

“Would the defendant please rise?”

Abigail and her attorney stood.

“Madam Forelady, have you arrived upon a verdict?”

“We have, Your Honor.”

It was all happening faster than Abigail had imagined. She felt dizzy, her knees trembling under her skirt, had to put a hand on the table to steady herself.

“Is the verdict to be returned a unanimous one?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“How do you find as to count one of the indictment charging the defendant with murder in the second degree?”

• • •

Midday, mid-June on the steps of the San Juan County courthouse, and the sky shone spring blue, the scant deciduous trees of Silverton just beginning to leaf out, baby greens and yellows smudging this high valley where mounds of snow lingered under the eaves of Victorian houses. It had been the hardest winter in a decade, the snowpack still four feet deep above timberline on the north aspects.

Walter Palmer ended his cell-phone call with a curt “No” and looked at his client. “Wanna grab lunch, Abigail? Brown Bear Café, and I’m buying.”

“I’ve got a flight to catch to New York.” Abigail embraced him, this fifty-six-year-old, balding, pudgy lawyer with halitosis and no sense of humor who’d fought for her freedom as if it were his own, put a soft kiss on

his cheek, and said, “Thank you, Walt. For everything. Best seventy-five grand I ever spent.”

• • •

Twenty-four hours later at Alexandra, a café three blocks from her studio apartment, Abigail bent to kiss a woman with short silver hair who was wearing a cotton summer dress that showed off the constellation of freckles on her browned shoulders.

“You look cute.”

She sat across from her mother, their table bordering the sidewalk of Hudson Street, a hot day in the city, the rectangle of sky between the buildings a washed-out summer white and the stench of the river draped like a dirty wet blanket over the West Village.

Sarah Foster said, “I ordered a bottle of wine. Best they had.”

Abigail dropped on the table the stack of mail she’d collected from the post office.

“Mom, you didn’t have to—”

“I know I didn’t, but I did. Excuse me for wanting to celebrate that my daughter isn’t going into the clink for thirty years. And you wouldn’t even let me be there.”

Abigail set her sunglasses on the wrought-iron table. “If the verdict had gone the other way, I couldn’t have watched what that did to you.”

Sarah took hold of her daughter’s hand. “Always the protector. Well, it’s all behind you now, Abby.”

“Yeah, but you know the full story. For everyone else, not guilty by reason of mental defect doesn’t mean you didn’t do it.”

“It’s nobody’s business.”

“People wonder. They’ll talk. Snow madness is what my attorney argued, what I said happened. That I went nuts for a little while ’cause of being stranded in the storm. Temporary psychosis and—”

“You know the truth. That’s all that matters.”

“Doesn’t make it easy.”

The waiter came, presented the bottle of chardonnay, filled their wine glasses.

When he’d left, Abigail pulled down into her lap the pile of mail rubber-banded together. As she perused the month’s accumulation of magazines

and past-due bills, she noticed the package from the mail-order film-processing company, and her face must have darkened, because her mother said, “What is it, Abby?”

Abigail tore open the envelope, withdrew a sheaf of photographs.

“Emmett Tozer shot a roll of film on the hike in, and his wife gave it to me our first night in Abandon. I guess I sent these in to be developed before I flew out to Colorado for the trial.”

“Sure you wanna see those right now?”

The photos had been shot in black-and-white, and the first picture wrecked Abigail’s stomach—a long downhill shot of the llamas, Scott and Jerrod, June and Lawrence, with Abigail bringing up the rear, every head hung as the party climbed a steep wooded section of the trail.

“This was the first day,” Abigail said, handing the picture to her mother.

They worked their way through the bottle of wine, Abigail providing captions for each photograph until she came to a picture that closed her throat and sheeted her eyes over with tears.

Sarah said, “Honey, what’s wrong?”

The ominous skyline of Abandon was a blur behind them, the low cloud deck expressed in a few dark strokes of gray, but their faces stood out in perfect focus—Lawrence smiling, not at the camera, but at Abigail, who was pulling away.

Abigail shook her head, laid the photograph on the table so her mother could see. Whispered, “I’ve never seen a picture of us together.” She recognized herself in the way his eyes had gone to slits with his smile, saw Lawrence in the shape of her mouth. “I know you were angry that I went to see him.”

“No, honey—”

“It wasn’t a betrayal. I needed to see him, and it’s strange to say, but all this shit I went through … meant I at least got to know him.”

“And I’m glad you did, Abby.”

“He was a broken man, Mom. What he did to us, it wasn’t right, but he was so young.”

Sarah was nodding now, and Abigail watched her mother push back the emotion.

“And he tried, Mom, you know? Asking me to come to Colorado, that was him trying. It couldn’t have been easy.”

Sarah lifted the photograph, stared at it for a moment, and when she looked up at Abigail, she was smiling through tears.

“He’s looking at you here like you’re someone he loves.”

Abigail wiped her eyes, watched a man walk out of the watch-repair shop across the street. “Mom, I tried to find him. Three times we flew into that box canyon, but—”

“I know.”

“—the snow was so deep, it had blocked—”

“Abby, you have to let all that go now.”

“He died doing what he wanted, I guess. What he loved.”

Sarah tilted the wine bottle, topped off her glass. “Where do you stand financially?”

“The lawyer wiped me out.”

“If I had the funds to—”

“I know.”

“Abby, I’ve been thinking.” Sarah scooted her chair over and leaned in close, speaking just above a whisper. “It’s summer now. Snow’s melted in the high country, right?”

“In a month or so. Why?”

“What if you went back to that mine, took a few bricks—”

“No, Mom.”

“Just enough to get you out of—”

“No.”

“Darling, you’re broke. Could you find the mine entrance?”

“Probably.”

“So why suffer when you don’t have to?”

Abigail leaned back in her chair.

“For hundreds of years, Mom, that gold’s done nothing—*nothing*—but bring out the worst in people. Make misery and death. There isn’t even the smallest part of me that’s tempted to go back to that wilderness, into that mine, to get it.

“You know I’m not a superstitious person, but if anything in this world is cursed, that gold is. I couldn’t be broke enough to resort to that. Now you’re the only other person I’ve told about the gold and the bones. Not even my lawyer knew, and I expect the secrets of Abandon to die with both of us, so the awful history of that town can stay shut away.”

Sarah had been biting her bottom lip. “Honey, that’s noble of you, but it’s gonna take you years to replenish your savings, get back on your feet.”

“So be it.”

“Are you sure? I mean, you’ve really decided this?”

Abigail finished her wine. “I jogged to Brooklyn this morning. Halfway across the bridge, I stopped and threw the key to that mine into the East River. So yeah, Mom, I’m sure.”

They’d nearly killed the bottle of wine. Abigail was feeling pleasantly buzzed now, working up a good sheen of sweat just sitting in the city heat, no relief but when the buses roared by, and she thought about that snowy night in the boardinghouse with Lawrence and the vision he’d shared of spending a Colorado summer with her, with grandchildren he would never have. There was still anger. God, plenty of that. She didn’t know how she’d ever be fully rid of it, but maybe there was space now for other things. Things that didn’t keep you up nights, that didn’t push good people away.

And she wondered where in that vast cave system her father had finally eased down to die, hoped he hadn’t been scared, and that when he’d finally broken free of all that freezing dark, he’d found his way to that Colorado summer and the man he might have been.

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

—T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”

Through the grottoes and tunnels of this cold and silent underworld, he returns, impossibly, to Abandon's crypt.

The beam of his dying headlamp sweeps across the battered iron door—still closed, still locked.

She hasn't come.

The disappointment cuts deeper than he imagined it would, despite having warned himself she wouldn't anticipate his actually making it back to the cavern. *He* hadn't figured on it, assuming instead he'd run out of light and die of thirst, lost in the granitic entrails of the mountain.

He turns away from the barred exit and walks back into the cavern among the bones, fearing his light will expire at any second, wanting at least to see and choose his final resting place.

Lawrence doesn't procrastinate with the decision. He picks a spot along the wall beside a blond-haired skeleton wrapped in a deteriorated woolen jacket and slumped over on the rocky floor, the browned skull resting on the humerus of her left arm, Gloria watching the last flame of the last lantern sputtering in the middle of the cavern.

She wonders, Am I the only one alive? No one else has made a sound in hours.

The coal oil is nearly used up, the batteries almost dead, and they wait for the light to go away, each passing moment charged with the possibility they are seeing the last they will ever see of this world.

The flame recedes into the wick and the headlamp dims.

Lawrence pulls off his lamp, looks into the bulb, the light fading before his eyes.

Soon there is only the molten glow of the tungsten filaments, the lantern's wick, then nothing.

He breathes in slowly, out slowly, trying to soothe himself with the proposition that this is where he belongs, a certain justice inherent with

being locked in the mountain to die alongside the objects of his obsession, but finding little comfort in anything but the knowledge that his daughter is safe, thinking it must be a sad testament that saying those hard truths to Abby before she climbed out of the cave was the single decent moment of his life.

Time limps by in the black.

They tremble with helpless terror, thinking it's death they crave, but they long only to be spared sitting alone with their fracturing minds, listening to death creep toward them.

Lawrence slides his arms out of the shoulder straps and unzips his daughter's pack, lifting out the water bottles he filled at the subterranean lake and standing them up.

He takes one, unscrews the cap, and turns the bottle upside down. When he's emptied them both, he throws the bottles out into the cavern, the plastic banging invisibly against the rock.

And Gloria and Lawrence gaze into the dark, thinking of a son, a daughter they will not see again, the images swarming and vivid, inlaid at once with such beauty and unbearable regret.

Chasing her little boy through an alpine meadow, sunlight caught up in his rusty hair, his high, small laughter resounding off the mountains as she tickles his ribs.

His little girl in his lap, turning the pages of some long-forgotten book whose words would crush him if he could remember.

Both, in their own way, thinking, *This is hell*—the absolute loss borne from all those slivers of perfection that passed unnoticed, unrelished.

In true dark, there is no gauging of time.

It moseys along and dawdles and hints at the horror of eternity.

At length, Lawrence folds the backpack into a pillow and settles down beside the bones of Gloria, whose shattered heart quits beating.

Author’s Note

The following books were indispensable in helping me to understand and create the world of Abandon: *Colorado Ghost Towns and Mining Camps* by Sandra Dallas (photography by Kendal Atchison), *The Mining Camps Speak* by Beth and Bill Sagstetter, *Images of the San Juans* by P. David Smith, Tomboy Bride by Harriet Fish Backus, *Mountains of Silver: Life in Colorado’s Red Mountain Mining District* by P. David Smith, *Silverton—A Quick History* by Duane A. Smith, *Colorado Mining Stories: Hazards, Heroics, and Humor* by Caroline Arlen (editor), *Dictionary of the American West* by Winfred Blevins, Rocky Mountain *Medicine—Doctors, Drugs, and Disease in Early Colorado* by Robert H. Shikes, M.D., and *Doctors of the Old West —A Pictorial History of Medicine on the Frontier* by Robert F. Karolevitz.

RUN

Confirmation of the murders came by way of two shocking films shot by holidaymakers. The first was initially believed to show a dolphin fishing for salmon - until closer examination revealed a relentless attack on a porpoise. . .The team described the mammals' injuries as "perhaps the worst example of inter-specific aggression any of us had ever seen. This young female had literally had the life beaten out of her."

The Daily Telegraph
January 25, 2008

The attack was. . .the first recorded instance of lethal raiding among chimpanzees. Until the attack. . .scientists treated the remarkable violence of humanity as something uniquely ours. Scientists thought that only humans deliberately sought out and killed members of their own species.

Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson
Demonic Males

THE tattered windsock hangs limp against its pole. Weeds erupt through fissures in the ancient pavement of the runway where she stands, and in the distance, support beams rise from heaps of twisted metal—three hangars, long since toppled upon a half dozen single- and twin-engine airplanes. She

watches the Beechcraft that brought her here lift off the ground, props screaming, and climb to clear the pines a quarter mile past the end of the runway. She walks into the field. The midmorning sun blazing down on her bare shoulders. The grass that grazes her sandaled feet still cold with dew. Someone jogs toward her, and beyond them she can see the team already at work, imagines they started the moment the light became worth a damn.

The young man who has come to greet her smiles and tries to take her duffle bag, but she says, “No, I’ve got it, thanks,” and keeps walking, her eyes catching on the colony of white canvas tents standing several football fields away near the northern edge of the forest. Still probably an insufficient distance to avoid the stink when the wind blows out of the south.

“Good flight in?” he asks.

“Little bumpy.”

“It’s so cool to finally meet you. I’ve read all about your work. I’m even using two of your books in my thesis.”

“That’s great. Good luck with it.”

“You know, there’s a few decent bars in town. Maybe we could get together and talk sometime?”

She lifts the strap of her heavy bag, swings it onto the other shoulder, and ducks under the yellow crime scene tape that circumnavigates the pit.

They arrive at the edge.

The young man says, “I’m doing my thesis on—”

“I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Matt.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Matt, but could you give me a minute alone here?”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, of course.”

Matt heads off toward the tents, and she lets her bag slide off her shoulder into the grass, estimating the dimensions of the pit at thirty-five meters by twenty meters, and presently attended to by nine people, seemingly oblivious to the flies and the stench, each in their respective worlds, doing what they walk this earth to do. She sits down and watches them work. Nearby, a man with shoulder-length graying hair buries a pickax into a wall of dirt. A young woman—probably another intern—flits from station to station, filling a bucket with backdirt to be added to the

mound of gravefill near the southern edge of the pit. Everywhere that human remains have been exposed, red flags stand thrust into the earth. She stops counting them after thirty. The nearest anthropologist appears on the verge of pedestaling a skeletonized body, down to the detail work now—poking chopsticks between ribs to clear out the dirt. Other skeletons lie partially exposed in the upper layers. The remnants of human beings with whom she will become closely acquainted in the weeks to come. Deeper, the dead are more than likely mummified, possibly even fleshed depending on the water content of the grave. Beside the autopsy tent on the other side, tables have been erected in the grass, and at one of them, a woman she recognizes from a previous UN mission is at work reassembling a small skeleton on a black velvet cloth to be photographed.

She realizes she's crying. Tears are fine, even healthy in this line of work, just never on the clock, never in the grave. If you lose control down there, you might never get it back.

Approaching footsteps snap her out of her reverie. She wipes her face and looks up, sees Sam coming toward her, the bald and scrawny Australian team leader who always wears a tie, especially in the field, his rubber boots swishing through the grass. He plops down beside her, reeking of decomp. Rips off the pair of filthy, elbow-length gloves and tosses them in the grass.

"How many have you taken out so far?" she asks.

"Twenty-nine. Mapping system shows a hundred and fifty, hundred and seventy-five still down in there."

"What's the demographic?"

"Men. Women. Children."

"High-velocity GSWs?"

"Yeah, we've collected a ton of .223 Remington casings. But this is another weird one. Same thing we saw in that mass grave in Denver. Maybe you heard about it."

"I haven't."

"Dismemberment."

"Have you determined what was used?"

"In most instances, it's not a clean break, like a machete or ax strike. These bones are splintered."

"A chainsaw would do that."

"Clever girl."

“Jesus.”

“So I’m thinking they cut everyone down with AR-15s, and then went through with chainsaws. Making sure no one crawled out.”

The blond hairs on the back of her neck stand erect, a rod of ice descending her spine. The sun burns down out of the bright June sky, more intense for the elevation. Brushstrokes of snow linger above timberline on the distant peaks.

“You okay?” Sam asks.

“Yeah. Just that this is my first mission out west. I’d been working New York City up until now.”

“Look, take the day if you want. Get yourself acclimated. You’ll need your head right for this one.”

“No.” She stands, hoisting the duffle bag out of the grass and engaging that compartment in her brain that functions solely as a cold, indifferent scientist. “Let’s go to work.”

There is no decent place to stand in a massacre.
Leonard Cohen

THE president had just finished addressing the nation, and the anchors and pundits were back on the airwaves, scrambling, as they had been for the last three days, to sort out the chaos.

Dee Colclough lay watching it all on a flatscreen from a ninth-floor hotel room ten minutes from home, a sheet twisted between her legs, the air-conditioning cool against the film of sweat on her skin.

She looked over at Kiernan, said, “Even the anchors look scared.”

Kiernan stubbed out his cigarette and blew a river of smoke at the television.

“I got called up,” he said.

“Your Guard unit?”

“I have to report tomorrow morning.” He lit another one. “What I hear, we’ll just be patrolling neighborhoods.”

“Keeping the peace until it all blows over?”

He glanced at her, head cocked with that boyish smirk she’d fallen for six months ago when he’d deposed her as an adverse expert witness in a medical malpractice case. “Does anything about this make you feel like it’s going to blow over?”

A new banner scrolled across the bottom of the screen—45 dead in a mass shooting at a Southern Baptist church in Columbia, South Carolina.

“Jesus Christ,” Dee said.

Kiernan dragged heavily on his cigarette. “Something’s happening,” he said.

“Obviously. The whole country—”

“That’s not what I mean, love.”

“What are you talking about?”

He didn’t answer right away, just sat there for a while, smoking.

“It’s been coming on now, little by little, for days,” he said finally.

“I don’t understand.”

“I barely do myself.”

Through the cracked window of their hotel room—distant gunshots and sirens.

“This was supposed to be our week,” she said. “You were going to tell Myra. I was—”

“You should go home, be with your family.”

“You’re my family.”

“Your kids at least.”

“What is this, Kiernan?” She could feel an angry knot bulging in her throat. “Are we not in this together? Are you having second thoughts about

everything or what?”

“It’s not that.”

“Do you have any concept of what I’ve already sacrificed for you?”

She couldn’t see all of his face in the mirror on the opposite wall, but she could see his eyes. Gaping into nothing. A thousand-yard stare. Somewhere other than this room. He’d gone deep, and she’d sensed it even before this moment, in the way he’d made love to her. Something held back. Something missing.

She climbed out of bed and walked over to her dress where she’d thrown it against the wall two hours ago.

“You don’t feel it?” he asked. “Not at all?”

“I don’t understand what—”

“Forget it.”

“Kiernan—”

“Fucking forget it.”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

Dee pulled the straps over her shoulders as Kiernan glared at her through the cloud of smoke around his head. He was forty-one years old, with short black hair, and a two-day shadow that reminded her so much of her father.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“You and I are not the same anymore, Dee.”

“Did I do something or—”

“I’m not talking about our relationship. It’s deeper. It’s. . .so much more profound than that.”

“You’re not making sense.”

She was standing by the window. The air coming in was cool and it smelled of the city and the desert that surrounded it. A pair of gunshots drew her attention, and when she looked through the glass she saw grids of darkness overspreading the city.

Dee glanced back at Kiernan, and she’d just opened her mouth to say something, when the lights and the television in their room cut out.

She froze.

Her heart accelerating.

Couldn’t see anything but the flare and fade of Kiernan’s tobacco ember.

Heard him exhale in the dark, and then his voice, all the more terrifying for its evenness.

“You need to get away from me right now,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“There’s this part of me, Dee, getting stronger every time I breathe in, that wants to hurt you.”

“Why?”

She heard the covers rip back. The sound of Kiernan rushing across the carpet.

He stopped inches from her.

She smelled the tobacco on his breath, and when she palmed his chest, felt his body shaking.

“What’s happening to you?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t stop it, Dee. Please remember that I love you.”

He put his hands on her bare shoulders, and she thought he was going to kiss her, but then she was flying through darkness across the room.

She crashed into the entertainment center, stunned, her shoulder throbbing from the impact.

Kiernan shouted, “Now get the fuck out while you still can.”

JACK Colclough moved down the hallway, past the kids’ bedrooms, and into the kitchen, where four candles on the granite countertop and two more on the breakfast table made this the brightest room in the house. Dee stood in shadow at the sink, filling another milk jug with water from the tap. The cabinets surrounding her thrown open and vacated, the stovetop cluttered with cans of food that hadn’t seen the light of day in years.

“I can’t find the roadmap,” Jack said.

“You looked under the bed?”

“Yes.”

“Last place I saw it.”

Jack set the flashlight on the counter and stared at his fourteen-year-old daughter, pouting at the breakfast table, her purple-streaked blond hair twirled around her finger.

“Got your clothes together yet?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Go, Naomi, right now, and help Cole pack, too. I think your brother got distracted.”

“We aren’t really leaving, are we?”

“Get going.”

Naomi pushed back from the table, her chair shrieking against the hardwood floor, and stormed out of the kitchen down the hallway.

“Hey,” he shouted after her.

“Cut her a break,” Dee said. “She’s terrified.”

Jack stood beside his wife.

The night beyond the windowglass was moonless and unmarred by even the faintest pinpricks of light. The city’s second night without power.

“This is the last jug,” Dee said. “Makes eight gallons.”

“That isn’t going to last us very long.”

From the battery-powered radio on the windowsill above the sink, an old woman’s voice replaced the static that had dominated the airwaves for the last six hours. Jack reached over, turned up the volume.

They listened as she read another name, another address over the radio.

Jack said, “They’ve lost their fucking minds.”

Dee turned off the tap, screwed a cap onto the final jug. “You think anyone’s actually acting on that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

“I’ll take these jugs out to the car. Go make sure the kids are getting packed.”

Jack hit the light switch out of habit, but when he opened the door, the garage remained dark. He shined the flashlight on the four steps that dropped out of the utility room. The smooth concrete was cold through his socks. He popped the hatch to the cargo area, illumination flooding out of

the overhead dome lights into the two-car garage. He set the first jug of water in the back of the Land Rover Discovery. Their backpacks and camping equipment hung from hooks over the chest freezer, and he lifted them down off the wall. Pristine, unblemished by even a speck of trail dust. Four never-slept-in sleeping bags dangled from the ceiling in mesh sacks. He dragged a workbench over from the red Craftsman tool drawer and climbed up to take them down. Dee had been begging for a family camping trip ever since he'd purchased three thousand dollars' worth of backpacking gear, and he'd fully intended for their family to spend every other weekend in the mountains or the desert. But two years had passed, and life had happened, priorities changed. The gas stove and water filter hadn't even been liberated from their packaging, which still bore price tags.

Inside the house, Dee released a loud gasp. He grabbed the flashlight, negotiated the sprawl of backpacks and sleeping bags, and bolted up the steps and through the door into the utility room. Past the washer and dryer, back into the kitchen. Naomi and his seven-year-old son, Cole, stood at the opening to the hallway, their faces all warmth and shadow in the candlelight, watching their mother at the sink.

Jack shined the light on Dee—her face streaked with tears, body visibly shaking.

She pointed at the radio.

"They just read off Marty Anderson's name. They're going through the humanities department, Jack."

"Turn it up."

"Jim Barbour is a professor of religious studies at the University of New Mexico." The old woman on the radio spoke slowly and with precision. "His address is Two Carpenter Court. Those of you near campus, go now, and while you're in the neighborhood, stop by the home of Jack Colclough."

"Dad—"

"Shhh."

"—a professor of philosophy at UNM."

"Oh my God."

"Shhh."

"—lives at Fourteen, fourteen Arroyo Way. Repeat. Fourteen, fourteen Arroyo Way. Go now."

“Oh my God, Jack. Oh my God.”

“Get the food in the back of the car.”

“This is not—”

“Listen to me. Get the food in the back of the car. Naomi, bring yours and Cole’s clothes out to the garage. I’ll meet you all there in one minute.”

He ran down the hall, his sockfeet skidding across the dusty hardwood floor as he rounded the turn into the master bedroom. Clothes everywhere. Drawers evacuated from a pair of dressers. Sweaters spilling out of the oak chest at the foot of the bed. Into the walk-in closet, stepping on shoes and winter coats and handbags long gone out of vogue. He reached for the highest shelf on the back wall, fingers touching the hard plastic case and two small boxes, which he crammed into the pockets of his khaki slacks.

He returned to the bedroom, dropped to his knees, his stomach, crawling under the bed frame until he grasped the steel barrel of the Mossberg, loaded and trigger-locked.

Then back on his feet, down the hall, through the kitchen, the living room, foyer, right up to the front door, the lightbeam crossing adobe walls covered in photographs of his smiling family—vacations and holidays from another lifetime. Beside the door, on a table of wrought iron and glass, he grabbed his keys, his wallet, even his phone though there’d been no signal in two days. Jammed his feet into a pair of trail shoes still caked with mud from his last run in the Bosque, not even a week ago. He didn’t realize how badly his hands were shaking until he failed on the first two attempts to tie his shoelaces.

Dee was struggling to fit a sleeping bag into a compression sack as he came down the steps into the garage.

“We don’t have time for that,” he said. “Just cram it in.”

“We’re running out of space.”

He grabbed the sleeping bag from her and shoved it into the back of the Land Rover on top of the small cardboard box filled with canned food.

“Throw the packs in,” he said as he lay the shotgun on the floor against the backseat.

“You find the map?” Dee asked.

“No. Just leave the rest of this shit. Here.” He handed her the plastic gun case and a box of 185 grain semijacketed hollowpoints. “See if you can load the Forty-five.”

“I’ve never even shot this gun, Jack.”

“Makes two of us.”

Dee went around to the front passenger door and climbed in while Jack forced the cargo hatch to close. He reached up to the garage door opener, pulled a chain that disengaged the motor. The door lifted easily, cool desert air filling the garage. The spice of wet sage in the breeze reminded him of cheap aftershave—his father. A lone cricket chirped in the yard across the street. No houselights or streetlamps or sprinklers. The surrounding homes almost invisible but for the gentlest starlight.

He caught the scent of cigarette smoke the same instant he heard the sound of footsteps in the grass.

A shadow was moving across his lawn—a darker patch of black coming toward him, and something the shadow carried reflected the interior lights of the Land Rover as a fleeting glimmer of silver.

“Who’s there?” Jack said.

No response.

A cigarette hit the ground, sparks scattering in the grass.

Jack was taking his first step back into the garage toward the open driver side door, realizing everything was happening too fast. He wasn’t going to react in time to stop what was about to—

“Don’t come any closer.” His wife’s voice. He looked over, saw Dee standing at the back of the SUV, pointing the .45 at the man who had stopped six feet away. He wore khaki canvas shorts, thong sandals, and a cream-colored oxford pollocked with bloodspatter. The glimmer was the blade of a butcher knife, and the hands that held it were dark with drying blood.

Dee said, “Kiernan? What are you doing here?”

He smiled. “I was just in the neighborhood. Been driving around, making some stops. I didn’t know you owned a gun. I’ve been looking for one myself.” Kiernan looked at Jack. “You must be Jack. We haven’t met, but I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m the guy who’s been fucking your wife.”

“Listen to me, Kiernan,” Dee said. “You’re sick. You need—”

“No, I’m actually better than I’ve ever been.” He pointed the tip of the butcher knife at the Land Rover. “Where you going?”

Tires screeched, an engine revved, and a few blocks away, headlights passed behind a hedge, light flickering through the crape myrtles like a

strobe. A succession of distant pops erupted in the night.

Jack said, “Dee we need to leave right now.”

“Go back to your car, Kiernan.”

The man didn’t move.

Jack took a step back and eased himself into the driver seat.

“Who is it out there, Daddy?” Cole asked.

Jack fished the keys out of his pocket. Craned his neck, peering into the backseat at his tense children.

“Naomi, Cole, I want you both to lay down in the backseat.”

“Why?”

“Just do what I tell you, Na.”

“Dad, I’m scared.”

“Hold your brother’s hand. You all right, Cole?”

“Yes.”

“Good man.”

He started the engine as Kiernan receded into the darkness of the front yard.

Dee jumped in beside him, slammed her door and locked it.

“You know how to pick ’em, Dee.”

“Do we have everything we need?”

“We have what we have, and now it’s time to leave. Stay down, kids.”

“Where are we going?” Cole asked.

“I don’t know, buddy. No talking, all right? Daddy needs to think.”

The dashboard clock read 9:31 p.m. as Jack shifted into reverse and backed out of the garage and down the driveway, nothing but the reddish glow of taillights to guide him. He turned into the street, put the car in drive. Hesitated, fingers searching for the automatic window control. The glass beside his head hummed down into the door. Over the idling of the Discovery’s engine, he heard another car approaching at high speed, headlights just becoming visible in the rearview mirror.

He stomped the gas, the Discovery accelerating through pure darkness.

“Jack, how can you see?”

“I can’t.”

He made a blind turn onto the next street, drove for several blocks in the dark.

Dee said, “Look.”

A house burned on the corner up ahead, flames shooting out of the dormers, the branches of an overhanging cottonwood fringed with embers while molten leaves rained down into the lawn.

“What is it?” Naomi asked.

“A house on fire.”

“Whose?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want to see.”

“No, Cole. Stay down with your sister.”

They sped up the street.

“I’m going to run us into something.” Jack flipped on the headlights. The console lit up. “You’re kidding me,” he said.

“What?”

“Way under a quarter of a tank.”

“I told you it was getting low last week.”

“You aren’t capable of pumping gas into a car?”

Three houses down, the headlights swept over two trucks that had pulled onto the lawn of an expansive adobe house.

Jack slowed.

“That’s the Rosenthals’ place.”

Through the drawn shades of the living room windows: four loud, bright flashes.

“What was that, Dad?”

“Nothing, Na.”

He gunned the engine and glanced over at Dee, a deathgrip on the steering wheel to keep his hands steady. Nodded at the gun in his wife’s lap.

“Wasn’t even loaded, was it?”

“I don’t know how.”

The university campus loomed empty and dark as Dee ripped open a box of ammunition. They passed a row of dorms. The quad. The student union. A squat brick building whose third floor housed Jack’s office. It occurred to him that today would have been the deadline for his bioethics class to hand in their papers on euthanasia.

“There’s a button on the left side behind the trigger,” he said. “I think it releases the magazine.”

“Are you talking about a gun?” Cole asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to shoot somebody?”

“It’s only to protect us, buddy.”

“But you might have to kill someone?”

“Hopefully not.” Jack watched Dee thumb another semijacketed round into the magazine.

“How many will it hold?” she asked.

“Nine, I think.”

“Where are we going, Jack?”

“Lomas Boulevard, then the interstate.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to work that—” Two sets of headlights appeared a hundred yards ahead. “Jesus Christ.”

“You see them, Jack?”

“Of course I see them.”

“What’s happening, Dad?”

In the rearview mirror, a third set of headlights rushed toward them.

“Jack, do something.”

His foot depressed the brake pedal into the floorboard.

“Jack.”

“Sit up kids.”

“What are you doing?”

“Naomi, Cole, sit up. Give me the gun.”

Dee handed over the .45, which he stowed under his seat.

“What are you doing, Jack?”

He took his foot off the brake, the Discovery nearing the roadblock.

“Jack, tell me what you’re—”

“Shut up. Everybody shut up.”

A large oak had been felled across the road, the middle section excised and two pickup trucks parked in front, blocking passage, their highbeams glaring into the night.

Dee said, “Oh, God, they’re armed.”

Jack counted four people standing in front of the vehicles, silhouetted by the headlights. One of their them came forward as the Discovery closed within ten yards—a man wearing an Isotopes baseball cap and a red

windbreaker. He trained a shotgun on the Discovery's windshield and extended his right hand for Jack to stop.

Jack shifted into park, locked the doors.

"I'll do the talking. Nobody say a word."

The third truck pulled within several feet of the Discovery's back bumper, its headlights halfway up the glass of the back hatch, so they shone directly into the rearview mirror. The man with the shotgun produced a flashlight and circled the Land Rover, shining the beam through every window before arriving back at Jack's door, where he tapped the glass and made circles in the air with his right pointer finger. Jack noted a cold trickle of sweat gliding over the contours of his ribs. He found the switch, lowered the window eight inches.

"What's going on?" he said, and it came out naturally enough, like he'd been pulled over for a blown taillight, just some annoying traffic stop in the flow of an otherwise normal day.

The man said, "Turn the interior lights on."

"Why?"

"Right now."

Jack hit the lights.

The man leaned forward, the sharp tang of rusted metal wafting into the car, Jack watching the eyes behind the square, silver frames, the glasses of an engineer, he thought—large, utilitarian. Those eyes took in his wife, his children, before settling back on Jack with a level of indifference, verging on disgust, that prior to this moment was completely alien to his experience.

The man said, "Where you off to so late?"

"What business is that of yours?"

When the man just stared and made no response, Jack said, "I don't know what this is all about, but we're going to move on here."

"I asked you where you're going."

Jack tried to wet the roof of his mouth with his tongue, but it had gone dry as sandpaper.

"Just up to Santa Fe to see some friends."

The driver's door of the truck behind them opened. Someone stepped down onto the pavement and walked over to join the others at the roadblock.

"Why do you have packs and jugs of water in the back of your car?"

“We’re going camping. There’s mountains up that way if you hadn’t heard.”

“I don’t think you’re going to Santa Fe.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think.”

“Give me your driver’s license.”

“I don’t think so.”

The man racked a fresh shell into the chamber, and the awful noise of the pump action set Jack’s heart racing.

“All right,” he said. He opened the center console, took out his wallet, spent ten seconds trying to slide his license out of the clear plastic sleeve. He handed it through the window, and the man took it and walked over to the trucks and the other men.

Dee whispered through tears, “Jack, look out your window at the other side of the road.”

Where the light from the trucks diffused into the barest strands of illumination, Jack saw a minivan parked in a vacant lot, and just a few feet from it, four pairs of shoes poking up through the tall, bending grass, the feet motionless and spread at forty-five degree angles, toes pointing toward the sky.

“They’re going to kill us, Jack.”

He reached under his seat, lifted the .45 into his lap.

The man coming back toward the Discovery now.

“Dee, kids,” Jack said as he shifted into reverse, “unbuckle your seatbelts right now and when I clear my throat, get down as low as you can into the floorboards and cover your heads.”

The man reached his window.

“Get out of the car. All of you except the boy.”

“Why?”

The shotgun barrel passed over the lip of the windowglass, stopping six inches from Jack’s left ear. So close he could feel the heat from recent use radiating off the steel.

“This is not the way you want to handle this, Mr. Colclough. Turn off the engine.”

The other men walked over.

Jack cleared his throat and jammed his foot into the gas pedal, the Land Rover lurching back, a winch punching through the rear window, glass

spraying everywhere. He grabbed the smoldering barrel with one hand and shifted into drive with the other. The shotgun blast ruptured his eardrum and blew the glass out of a window, the recoil ripping the barrel out of his hand along with several layers of cauterized skin. He could hear only a distant ringing, like a symphony of old telephones buried deep underground. Muzzleflashes and the front passenger window exploded, shards of glass embedding themselves in the right side of his face as he pushed the gas pedal into the floor again and cranked the steering wheel to miss the branches of the downed oak tree.

The Discovery tore through the grass and weeds of the vacant lot, the jarring so violent at this speed, Jack could barely keep his grip on the steering wheel. He turned up a grassy slope and took the Land Rover through a six-foot fence at thirty miles per hour into the backyard of a brick ranch. Plowed over a rose garden and a birdbath, then broke through the fence again near the house and raced down the empty driveway and onto a quiet street.

He hit seventy-five within four blocks, blowing through two-way stops, four-way stops, and one dark traffic signal until he saw lights in the distance —the fast-approaching intersection with Lomas Boulevard.

He let the Discovery begin to slow, finally brought it to a full stop on the curb, and shifted into park. Darkness in the rearview mirror, no incoming headlights. He tried to listen for the sound of tailing cars, but he heard only those muffled telephones and the painful bass throbbing of his left eardrum. He was shaking all over.

He said, “Is anybody hurt?”

Dee climbed out of the floorboard and said something.

“I can’t hear you,” he said. In the backseat, he saw Naomi sitting up. “Where’s Cole?” Dee squirmed around and leaned into the backseat, reaching down into the floorboard where Cole had taken cover. “Is Cole okay?” The murmur of voices grew louder. “Would someone please tell me if my son is okay?”

Dee leaned back into the front seat, put her hands on her husband’s face, and pulled his right ear to her lips.

“Stop shouting. Cole’s fine, Jack. He’s just scared and balled up on the floor.”

He drove six blocks to Lomas Boulevard. This part of the city still had power. The road luminous with streetlights, traffic lights, the glow of fast-food restaurant signs that stretched for a quarter mile in either direction like a glowing mirage of civilization. Jack pulled through a red light and into the empty westbound lanes. The orange reserve tank light clicked on.

As they passed through the university's medical campus, someone stepped out into the road, and Jack had to swerve to miss them.

Dee said something.

"What?"

"Go back," she shouted.

"Are you crazy?"

"That was a patient."

He turned around in the empty boulevard and drove back toward the hospital and pulled over to the curb. The patient already halfway across the road and staggering barefoot like he might topple—tall and gaunt, his head shaved, a scythe-shaped scar curving from just above his left ear across the top of his scalp, the kind of damage it would have taken a couple hundred stitches to close. The wind rode the gown up his toothpick legs.

Jack lowered his window as the man collided breathlessly into his door. He tried to speak but he was gulping down breaths of air and emanating the hospital stench of sanitized death.

At last the man raised his head off his forearms and said in a voice gone soft and raspy from disuse, "What's happening? I woke up several hours ago. The doctors and nurses are gone."

Jack said, "How long have you been in the hospital?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know how you got there?"

"I don't remember."

"You're in Albuquerque."

"I know that. I live here."

Jack shifted into park, eyeing the rearview mirror. "It's October fifth—"

"October?"

"Things started about a week ago."

"What things?"

“At first, it was just bits on the news that would catch your attention. A murder in a good neighborhood. A hit-and-run. But the reports kept coming and there were more everyday and they got more violent and unbelievable. It wasn’t just happening here. It was all over the country. A police officer in Phoenix went on a shooting rampage in an elementary school and then a nursing home. There were fifty home invasions in one night in Salt Lake. Homes were being burned. Just horrific acts of violence.”

“Jesus.”

“The president made a televised speech last night, and right after, the power went out. Cell phone coverage became intermittent. The internet too jammed up to use. By this afternoon, there were really no functioning lines of communication, not even satellite radio, and the violence was pandemic.”

The man looked away from Jack as gunshots rang out in a neighborhood across the street.

“Why is it happening?” he asked.

“I don’t know. The power went out before any consensus was reached. They think it’s some virus, but beyond that. . .”

Dee said, “Do you know how you were injured?”

“What?”

“I’m a doctor. Maybe I can help—”

“I need to find my family.”

Jack saw the man look into their car, and he thought he was going to ask for a ride, wondering how he would tell him no, but then the man turned suddenly and limped off down the road.

There were lights on inside, but no customers, no cashier. He swiped his credit card through the scanner, waiting for authorization as he studied the ghost town and listened over the dwindling telephones in his head for the threat of approaching cars.

All but super premium had run dry. He stood in the cold pumping twenty-three and a half gallons into the Discovery’s tank and thinking how he’d meant to bring the red plastic container that held the lawnmower gas.

As he screwed the gas cap on, three pickup trucks roared by, pushing ninety down Lomas. Jack didn’t wait for a receipt.

Another mile and I-25 materialized beyond some dealerships, cars backed up from the onramps on either side of the overpass. Streams of red light winding north through the city, streams of white light crawling south.

Jack said, “Doesn’t look like they’re getting anywhere, does it?”

He veered into the left lane and streaked under the overpass at sixty miles per hour, his right ear improving, beginning to pick up the guttural sounds of the straining engine and the whimperings of Cole.

A blur of citylight, the Wells Fargo building glowing green in the distance. They shot three miles through downtown and Old Town, past Tingley Park, and then across the Rio Grande into darkness again, the western edge of the city without power.

“You have blood coming out of your ear, Jack.”

He wiped the side of his face.

Naomi said, “Are you hurt, Dad?”

“I’m fine, sweetie. Comfort your brother.”

They drove north along the river. Across the water, a great fire was consuming a neighborhood of affluent homes, their immense frames visible amid the flames. Jack said under his breath, “Where the fuck is the military?”

Dee saw the lights first—a cluster of them a couple miles up the road.

“Jack.”

“I see them.”

He killed the headlights and braked, crossed the yellow line into the other lane, then dropped down off the shoulder onto the desert. The Discovery’s cornerlamps barely lit the way, showing only ten feet of the desert floor as Jack negotiated between shrubs and sagebrush and skirted the edge of a serpentine arroyo.

The hardpan reached the broken pavement. Jack pulled back onto the highway and turned out the cornerlamps. Some distance to the south, the roadblock they’d detoured at the intersection of 48 and 550 stood out in the dark—cones of light blazing into the night.

They rode north without headlights, cold desert air streaming in through the jagged windowglass. Jack's eyes were adjusting to the starlight, so that he could just discern the white wisps of reflective paint that framed the highway. Their city fell away behind them, a mosaic of darkness and light and four distinct fires that burned visibly from a distance of twenty miles.

An hour north, on the Zia Reservation, they met with a car heading south, its taillights instantly firing, Jack watching in the rearview mirror as it spun around in the highway and started after them. He accelerated, but the car quickly closed on their bumper. Its lightbar throwing shivers of blue and red through the fractured glass of the Discovery's windows.

The officer's boots scraped the pavement as he approached the Land Rover, his sidearm drawn and paired with a Mag-Lite. He sidled up to Jack's lowered window and pointed a revolver at his head.

"You armed, sir?"

Jack had to turn his right ear to the man so he could hear, blinking against the sharp light. "I have a Forty-five in my lap."

"Loaded?"

"Yes sir."

"Just keep your hands on the steering wheel." The state police officer shined his light into the backseat, said, "Jesus." He holstered his gun. "You folks all right?"

"Not especially," Jack said.

"Somebody shot your car up pretty good."

"Yes sir."

"You coming from Albuquerque?"

"We are."

"How are things there?"

"Terrible. What do you hear? We've been checking our car radio, but it's all static."

"I hear I've lost officers up on the northwest plateau, but I don't know that for certain. I been told of roadblocks, widespread home invasions. A National Guard unit getting slaughtered, but it's all rumors. Things came apart so fast, you know?" The officer pulled off his wool hat. He scratched

his bald dome, tugged at the tufts of gray that flared out above his ears and ringed his skull. “Where you headed?”

“We don’t know yet,” Jack said.

“Well, I’d get off the highway. Least for the night. I been chased and shot at by several vehicles. They couldn’t catch my Crown Vic, but they’d probably run you down no problem.”

“We’ll do that.”

“You say you have a Forty-five?”

“Yes sir.”

“Comfortable with it?”

“I used to deer hunt with my father, but it’s been years since I’ve even shot a gun.”

The officer’s eyes cut to the backseat, his face brightening. He waved and Jack glanced back, saw Cole sit up and look through the glass. He lowered Cole’s window.

“How you doing there, buddy? You look like a real brave boy to me. Is that right?”

Cole just stared.

“What’s your name?”

Jack couldn’t hear his son answer, but the officer reached his gloved hand through the window.

“Good to meet you, Cole.” He turned back to Jack. “Hunker down someplace safe for the night. You ain’t a pretty sight.”

“My wife’s a doctor. She’ll patch me up.”

The officer lingered at his window, staring off into the emptiness all around them—starlit desert and the scabrous profile of a distant mountain range, pitch black against the navy sky. “What do you make of it?” he said.

“Of what?”

“Whatever this is that’s happening. What we’re doing to ourselves.”

“I don’t know.”

“You think this is the end?”

“Sort of feels that way tonight, doesn’t it?”

The officer rapped his knuckles on the Discovery’s roof. “Stay safe, folks.”

Ten miles on, Jack left the highway. He crossed a cattle guard, and drove 2.8 miles over a washboarded, runoff-rutted wreck of a road until the outcropping of house-size rocks loomed straight ahead in the windshield. He pulled behind a boulder, so that even with the lights on, their Land Rover would be completely hidden from the highway. Shifted into park. Killed the engine. Dead quiet in this high desert. He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned around in his seat so he could see his children.

“You know what we’re going to do?” he said. “When this is all over?”

“What?” Cole asked.

“I’m taking you kids back to Los Barriles.”

“Where?”

“You remember, buddy. That little town on the Sea of Cortez, where we stayed over Christmas a couple years ago? Well, when this is over, we’re going back for a month. Maybe two.”

He looked at Dee, at Naomi and Cole.

Exhaustion. Fear.

The overhead dome light cut out. Jack could feel the car listing in the wind, bits of dust and dirt and sand slamming into the metal like microscopic ball bearings.

Cole said, “Remember that sandcastle we built?”

Jack smiled in the darkness. They’d opened presents and gone out to the white-sand beach and spent all day, the four of them, building a castle with three-foot walls and a deep moat, wet sand dribbled over the towers and spires to resemble rotten and eroded stone.

“That sucked,” Naomi said. “Remember what happened?”

A storm had blown in that afternoon over Baja as the tide was coming in. When a rod of lightning touched the sea a quarter mile out, the Colcloughs had screamed and raced back to their bungalow as the rain poured down and the black clouds detonated. Jack had glanced back as they scrambled over the dunes, glimpsed their sandcastle rebuffing its first decent wave, the moat filling with saltwater.

“Do you think the waves knocked it down?” Cole said.

“No, it’s still standing.”

“Don’t speak to your brother that way. No, Cole, it wouldn’t have lasted the night.”

“But it was a big castle.”

“I know, but the tide’s a powerful force.”

“We walked out there the next morning, Cole,” Dee said. “Remember what we saw?”

“Smooth sand.”

“Like we hadn’t even been there,” Naomi said.

“We were there,” Jack said, and he pulled the key out of the ignition. “That was a great day.”

“That was a stupid day,” Naomi said. “What’s the point of building a sandcastle if you can’t watch it get destroyed?”

Jack could hear in her voice that she didn’t mean it. Just trying to push whatever button she thought he’d left unguarded. Under different circumstances, it would’ve pissed him off, but not tonight.

He said, “Well, it wasn’t stupid to me, Na. That was one of my favorite days. One of the best of my life.”

Jack unlocked the shotgun. He found a good-size rock and smashed out the tail- and brake- and reverse lights. Unloaded everything from the cargo area and picked the glass slivers out of the carpet and knocked the remaining glass out of the back window, the rear right panel, the front passenger window. The army-green paint of the front passenger door and the back hatch bore several bulletholes. A round had even punctured the leather of Jack’s headrest, a white puff of stuffing mushroomed out of the exit hole.

Jack had folded the backseat down. Naomi and Cole slept in their down bags in the car. It was after 1:00 a.m., and he sat against a boulder. Dee’s headlamp was shining in his eyes as she wiped the right side of his face with an iodine prep pad. She used plastic tweezers from the first aid kit to dig the glass shrapnel out of his face.

“Here comes a big one,” she said.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.”

The shard clinked into the small aluminum tray, and when she’d removed all the glass she could see, she dabbed away the blood with a fresh iodine pad.

“Does this need stitches?” he asked.

“No. How’s the left ear?”
“What?”
“How’s the left ear?”
“What?”
“How’s the—”
He smiled.
“Fuck you. Let’s dress that hand.”

They inflated the Therm-a-Rests and crawled into their sleeping bags and lay on the desert floor under the stars.

Jack heard Dee crying.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“No, what?”

“You don’t want to hear it.”

“Kiernan.” Jack had known about Dee’s lover almost from the inception of their affair—she’d been honest with him from the beginning, and on some level he respected her for that—but this was the first time he’d spoken the man’s name.

“That wasn’t him,” she said. “He’s a decent man.”

“You loved him.”

She nodded, a sob slipping out.

“I’m sorry, Dee.”

The wind kicked up. They faced each other to escape the clouds of dust.

“I’m scared, Jack.”

“We’ll keep heading north. Maybe it’s better in Colorado.”

In the intermittent moments of stillness when the wind died away, Jack stared up into the sky and watched the stars fall and the imperceptible migration of the Milky Way. He kept thinking how strange it felt to be lying beside his wife again. He’d been sleeping in the guestroom the last two months. They’d lied to the kids, told them it was because of his snoring, having promised each other they’d handle the dissolution of their family with grace and discretion.

Dee finally slept. He tried to close his eyes but his mind wouldn’t stop. His ear throbbed and the scorched nerve endings flared under the barrel-shaped blister across the fingers of his left hand.

COYOTES woke him, a pack trotting across the desert half a mile away. Dee's head rested in the crook of his arm, and he managed to extricate himself without rousing her. He sat up. His sleeping bag was glazed with dew. The desert the color of blued steel in the predawn. He wondered how long he'd slept—an hour? Three? His hand no longer burned but he still couldn't hear a thing out of his left ear except a lonely, hollow sound like wind blowing across an open bottle top. He unzipped his bag and got up. He slipped his socked feet into unlaced trail shoes and walked over to the Land Rover. Stood at the glassless back hatch watching his children sleep as the light strengthened all around him.

They were packed and on the road before the sun came up, pressing north, the morning air whipping through the broken windows. For breakfast, they passed around a bag of stale tortilla chips and a jug of water that had chilled almost to freezing in the night. Eighty miles through Indian country—sagebrush and pinion and long vistas and deserted trading posts and buttes that flushed when first struck by sunlight and a ridiculous casino at seven thousand feet in the middle of nothing on the Apache res. The two towns they blazed through on the northwest plateau stood perhaps too quiet for eight-thirty on a Friday morning, like Christmas and everyone indoors, but nothing else seemed wrong.

Jack said, "Give me your BlackBerry, Na."

"Why? There's no signal."

"I want it fully charged in case we get one."

She handed it up between the seats.

"I'm really worried about you, Na," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"You haven't been able to send a text in two days. I can't imagine the withdrawal you're going through."

Jack saw Dee smile.

"You're such a retard, Dad."

They climbed through high desert as the road followed the course of a river. Dee turned on the radio, let it seek the AM dial—nothing but static—and FM landed just one station, an NPR affiliate out of southwest Colorado that had diverged markedly from its standard programming. A young man read names and addresses over the airwaves.

Jack slammed the palm of his hand into the radio.

The volume spiked, the station changed, the car filled with blaring static.

Twenty miles ahead, out of a valley tucked into the juniper-covered foothills, reams of smoke lifted into the blue October sky.

When the kids were younger, they had vacationed in this tourist town—ski trips after Christmas, autumn driving tours to see the aspen leaves, the long holiday weekends that framed their summers.

“Let’s not go through there,” Dee said.

A few miles ahead, everything appeared to be burning.

“I think we should try to get through,” he said. “This is a good route. Not too many people live in these mountains.”

Powerlines had been cut down to block the business route, forcing Jack to detour up Main Avenue, and when they turned into the historic district, Dee said, “Jesus.” Everything smoking, getting ready to burn or burning or burned already. Broken glass on the street. Fire hydrants launching arcs of white spray. Tendrils of black smoke seething through the door- and window-frames of the hotel where they used to stay—a redbrick relic from the mining era. Two blocks down the smoke thickened enough to blot out the sky. Orange fire raged through the exploded third-floor windows of an apartment building, and the canopies of the red oaks that lined the sidewalks flamed like torches.

“Unbelievable,” Dee said.

The kids stared out their windows, speechless.

Jack’s eyes burned.

He said, “We’re getting a lot of smoke in here.”

The windows blew out of a luxury Hummer on the next block. Flames engulfed it.

“Go faster, Jack.”

Cole started coughing.

Dee looked back between the front seats. “Pull your shirt over your mouth and breathe through it. Both of you.”

“Are you doing it too, Mama?”

“Yes.”

“What about Daddy?”

“He will if he can. He needs his hands to drive right now.”

They passed through a wall of smoke, the world outside the windows grayish white, all things obscured. They rolled through an intersection under dark traffic signals.

“Look out, Jack.”

“I see it.”

He steered around a FedEx truck that had been abandoned in the middle of the street, its left turn signal still blinking, though at half-speed, like a heart with barely any beat left in it. Cole coughed again.

They emerged from the smoke.

Jack slowed the car, said, “Close your eyes, kids.”

Cole through his shirt: “Why?”

“Because I told you to.”

“What is it?”

Jack brought the Land Rover to a full stop. An ember blew in through Dee’s window and alighted upon the dash. Smoldering into the plastic. Ash fell on the windshield like charcoal snow. He looked back at his children.

“I don’t want you to see what’s up ahead.”

“Is it something bad?” Cole said.

“Yes, it’s something very bad.”

“But you’re going to see it.”

“I have to see it because I’m driving. If I shut my eyes, we’ll wreck. But I don’t want to see it. Mama’s going to close her eyes, too.”

“Just say what it is.”

Jack could see Naomi already straining to peer around her mother’s seat.

“Is it dead people?” Cole asked.

“Yes.”

“I want to see them.”

“No, you don’t.”

“It won’t bother me. I promise.”

“I can’t make you shut your eyes, but I can give you fair warning. This is the kind of thing you’ll dream about, so when you wake up tonight crying and scared, don’t call out for me to comfort you, because I warned you not to look.”

Thinking, Will there be a tonight to wake from?

Jack drove on. They had been shot down, ten or fifteen of them, some killed outright, brainmatter slung into quivering gray-pink globules on the street. Others had managed to cover some ground before dying, the distance of their final crawl measured by swaths of purple-stained pavement and in one instance a long gray rope of gut like the woman had been tethered to the street. Jack glanced back, saw Naomi and Cole staring through the window, their faces pressed to the glass. His eyes filled up.

In the middle of town, they crossed a river that sourced from the mountains. In the summertime, in direct sun, it shone luminescent green and teemed with rafters and fly-fishermen. Today, the water reflected the colorless, smoked-out sky. A body floated down the rapids under the trestle bridge, jostled in the current, and Jack spotted numerous others rounding the bend—a group of blindfolded children.

Main Avenue widened to four lanes. Burned, abandoned cars clogged the street. Out of the valley rose a hundred unique trails of smoke.

“It’s like an army came through,” Dee said.

They passed two fast-food restaurants, several gas stations, a fairground, a high school, a string of motels.

Jack pointed to a grocery store. “We should get more food.”

“No, Jack.”

“Keep going, Dad. I don’t like it here.”

A woman stumbled out of the supermarket parking lot and ran into the street, holding out her hands to the Land Rover as if willing it to stop.

“No, Jack.”

“She’s hurt.”

He braked.

“Goddammit, Jack.”

The Land Rover’s bumper came to rest ten feet from the woman in the road.

Dee glared at him as he turned off the engine and opened his door and stepped down into the road. The doorslam echoed against an unnerving silence, disrupted only by a single sound Jack barely even registered with one unshattered eardrum—a baby wailing several blocks away.

He could see in the way the woman watched him approach that her eyes had witnessed pure horror in recent hours. He suddenly wished he'd never stopped the car, that he'd stayed on the other side of the windshield, because this was real, breathing agony standing before him. She sat down in the road. The intensity of her weeping like nothing Jack had ever heard, and he acknowledged the urge to dehumanize her, to shun sympathy. Too horrifying to identify with a human being who had reached this level of despair. Something contagious in their grief and loss. Her hair was dreadlocked with blood and her arms streaked red and her long-sleeved white tee-shirt stained like a butcher's apron.

Jack said, "Are you hurt?"

She looked up at him, eyes nearly swollen shut from crying. "How can this be happening?"

"Are they still here? In town?"

She wiped her eyes. "We saw them coming with guns and axes. We hid in the closet. They came through the house, looking for us. I'd been in Mike's house before. He'd sung carols on our front porch. I'd taken his family Christmas cookies. He said if we came out they would do it quickly."

Jack squatted down in the road. "But you got out. You escaped."

"They shot at us as we ran out the back door. Katie was hit in the back. They were coming. . .I left her."

"I'm so sorry."

"I left her and I don't even know if she was dead."

Dee opened her door. Jack glanced back, said, "You want to come take a look at—"

"That's a lie. I'm a fucking liar. I know she wasn't dead because she was crying."

"We need to go, Jack."

"She was crying for me."

He touched the woman's shoulder. "Do you want to come with us?"

She stared back at him, her eyes glazing, mind drifting elsewhere.

“Jack, could we please leave this fucking town already?”

He stood.

“Katie was crying for me. I was so scared.”

“Do you want to come with us?”

“I want to die.”

Jack walked back to the Land Rover and opened the door as the woman screamed.

“What happened to her?” Naomi asked.

He started the engine.

Drove around the woman in the road and turned up a sidestreet.

“Jack, where are you going?”

He pulled over to the curb and turned off the car and got out. The houses burned and smoking. A row of bodies in the street on the next block. Dee climbed out and walked around to the front of the car and stood facing him.

“Jack?”

“I heard a baby crying over here while I was talking to that woman.”

“I don’t hear a thing, Jack. Look at me. Please.”

He looked down at her. As beautiful to him as she had ever been standing in this charred neighborhood in this murdered town. He saw the pulsing of her carotid artery in her long and slender neck. She seemed intensely alive.

Dee pointed toward the Land Rover. “They’re our charge. Do you understand that? Nobody else.”

“You made me stop for the hospital patient last—”

“That was the doctor in me. I’m over it now. We don’t have much food or water. We’re so vulnerable.”

“I know.”

“Jack.” She wouldn’t go on until he’d met her eyes. “I am holding my shit together by a very thin thread.”

“Okay.”

“I need you to make smart decisions.”

“I know,” he said, still straining to hear the cries of the baby.

North out of town. Out of the smoke and through a valley, its winding river marked by cottonwoods and the valley itself enclosed by red-banded cliffs and everything so purely lit under the lucid blue, like a dream, Jack thought. Or a memory. The way he still saw Montana that fall day all those

years ago when he'd caught his first glimpse of Dee. The highway paralleled a narrow gauge railroad. They passed no other cars. Pastured cows raised their oblong heads to watch them speed by, and the air that filled the car carried the sweet, rich stink of a dairy farm. In the backseat, Naomi leaned on the door, listening to her iPod. Cole slept. For a second, it felt like one of those weekend trips to Colorado, and Jack did everything in his power to embrace the fantasy.

The road began to climb. Pressure building in Jack's ears. The sky verging toward purple, and the air that rushed in through Dee's window growing cooler and redolent of spruce trees. On the mountainsides, the conifers were laced with acres of aspen. The summits stood treeless, all gray and broken rock patched with old snow. They passed a deserted ski resort. A livery for tourists to purchase horseback rides. The road steepened. They climbed past ten thousand feet through a stand of spruce and crested the pass.

A few miles up the road, they came to a second, higher pass through the mountains. Jack pulled over into the empty parking lot and turned off the engine. He and Dee got out and took a look around. Late morning. You could see for miles. The wind blew. Clouds amassing to the north. He took his BlackBerry out of his pocket. Powered it up. No service.

He opened his fly and urinated into the grass.

"Jack, there's a restroom right there."

"See anybody around?"

"Just because you can, huh?"

He zipped up, said, "Silverton's down in that valley over there."

Dee went to the car and came back with a pair of binoculars. She glassed the road from the pass to where it disappeared into the forest several miles north and a few hundred feet below.

"Anything?" Jack said.

"Nothing."

They rode down from the pass out of the high country and back into the forest and then out of it again. The road had been gashed out of a cliff and the drop off the right shoulder was a thousand feet down to a river that

snaked through a canyon. The valley from which it flowed contained a small town dotted with brightly-painted buildings and a railroad yard and a gold-domed courthouse at the north end.

“Well, it isn’t on fire,” Jack said. He glanced over, saw Dee massaging the back of her neck. “Headache?”

“Yeah, and it’s getting worse.”

“You know what it is, don’t you?”

“The elevation?”

“Nope. I’ve got one, too.”

“Oh my God, you’re right. We’ve missed our morning coffee.”

They rounded a hairpin turn: three trucks parked across the road, six men sprinting toward the Land Rover, guns pointed, screaming at them to stop the car.

“Jack, turn around.”

“They’re too close. They’ll open fire.”

“Won’t they anyway?”

“What’s happening?”

“Naomi, stay quiet, keep your headphones in, and don’t wake Cole.”

Jack still searched for a way out as the men closed in—a steep drop through trees over the right shoulder, an impossible climb up the mountainside off the left, and not enough room in this fast-diminishing increment of time to execute a three-point-turn and haul ass back the way they’d come.

Jack shifted into park. “Put your hands up, Dee.”

“Jack—”

“Just do it.”

The first man arrived training a bolt-action Remington on Jack’s head through the glass as the others surrounded the car.

“Roll it down,” he said. Jack lowered the window. “Where the fuck are you going?”

“Just north.”

“North?”

“Yeah.”

The man was bearded but young. Not even twenty-five, Jack thought. He wore a camouflage hunting jacket. A braided goatee tied off with a dangling

row of black beads.

Someone standing behind the Rover said, “New Mexico tag.”

“Why are you up here? Who are you with?”

“No one, it’s just us.”

Another man walked over and stood by Jack’s window. A patchier beard. Long black hair flowing out of his corduroy bomber hat.

He said, “There’s a kid sleeping in the backseat. Their car’s been shot to hell, Matt. They got supplies and shit in the back.”

“We had to leave our home in Albuquerque last night,” Jack said. “Barely made it out.”

The man named Matt lowered his .30-.30. “You come through Durango this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“We heard it got pretty fucked up.”

“They burned it. Bodies everywhere.” Jack watched the fear take up residence in the man’s face. A sudden paling that made him look even younger than Jack had first suspected.

“It’s bad, huh?”

“Biblical.”

The others gathered around Jack’s window.

Cole sat up. “Are they mean, Daddy?”

“No, buddy, we’re okay.”

“Yeah, we’re cool, little man.”

The assembled men looked less like sentries than armed ski bums. Their weapons better suited to elk hunting than warfare—all toting high-powered rifles slung over their shoulders but not a pistol or shotgun to be seen.

“So you’re guarding the road into town?” Jack asked.

“Yep, and there’s another group stationed below Red Mountain Pass, trying to destroy the road.”

“Why?”

“There’ve been reports of a convoy of trucks and cars heading south from Ridgeway.”

“How many vehicles?”

“Don’t know. Most of Silverton’s already gone up into the mountains. Glad to see you driving a Land Rover, ’cause that’s really the only route left.”

“What route is that?”

“Cinnamon Pass to Lake City. And you should probably get going. It’s a bitch of a road.”

They rolled into the old mining town at midday and Jack pulled into a small grocery with several gas pumps out front. He sent Dee and the kids inside to scrounge for food while he flipped the lever and prayed there was something left. There was. He topped off the Rover’s tank, walked into the grocery. The cash register stood unmanned, the shelves stripped bare, the store pillaged.

He called out, “You finding anything?”

Dee from the back: “Slim pickings, although I did get a road map. Any gas left?”

“I filled us up.” Jack grabbed two five-gallon gasoline cans off a shelf in the barebones automotive aisle and went outside to the pump and filled them up. He cleared out a spot amid the camping gear and lifted the red plastic cans one at a time through the open window of the back hatch. Inside the store again, it took him several minutes to find the plastic sheeting. He carried two boxes of it, a roll of duct tape, and the single remaining quart of 10w-30 motor oil back outside with him. Dee and the kids were already in the car when he climbed in.

“How’d we do?” he said.

“Three strips of jerky. A can of diced tomatoes. Box of white rice. Bottle of seasoning.”

“Sounds like a meal.”

Up Greene Street for several blocks. Most of the shops closed. No one out. The sky sheeted over with uniform gray clouds which had moved in so suddenly that just a wedge of autumn blue lingered to the south, all the brighter for its dwindling existence. Jack turned into a parking space.

“I won’t be long.”

He left the car running and stepped into the sporting goods store. It smelled of waterproofing grease and gunpowder. Everywhere, racks of bibs and jackets patterned in every conceivable design of camouflage and mounted deer and elk heads with their impossible racks and a stuffed brown bear standing on its hind legs looking back toward an aisle of nets and fly-

rods and hip waders. A burly-looking man with the girth of a drink machine stood watching him from behind the counter. He wore a flannel shirt, a vest flecked with renegade feathers of down, and he was pushing rounds into a revolver.

“What are you lookin for?”

“Shells for a twelve gauge and a—”

“Sorry.”

“You’re out?”

“I ain’t sellin any more ammo.”

The gun cases behind the counter had been emptied.

“Tell you what.” The man reached under the counter, brought out a sheathed hunting knife, and set it on the glass. “Take that. Best I can do. On the house.”

Jack walked to the counter. “I already have a knife.”

“What kind?”

“Swiss Army.”

“Good luck killin some son of a bitch with it.”

Jack lifted the large bowie. “Thanks.”

The storeowner flipped the cylinder closed and set to work loading a magazine.

“Are you staying?” Jack asked.

“You think I look like the type of hombre to let some motherfuckers run me out of my own town?”

“You should think about leaving. They wiped Durango off the map.”

“Under advisement.”

Someone pounded the storefront glass, and Jack turned, saw Dee frantically waving him outside.

When he pushed the door to the sporting goods store open, Jack heard a distant growl, a symphony of engines growing louder with each passing second, like the opening mayhem of a speedway race.

Dee said, “They’re here.”

As he reached to open his door, gunshots broke out in the south end of town and men were yelling and he glimpsed the lead trucks of the convoy already turning onto Greene Street. He jumped in behind the wheel and reversed out of the parking space and shifted into drive. Fed the engine gas,

the hotels and restaurants and gift shops racing by, Jack running stop signs, doing seventy by the time he passed the courthouse at the north end of town.

The road turned sharply.

Jack braked, tires squealing.

Dee said, “You know where you’re going?”

“Sort of.”

The road left town and went to dirt, still smooth and wide enough for Jack to keep their speed above sixty. It ran for a couple of miles above the river and then emerged into a higher valley. They passed ruined mines. Mountains swept up all around them, the craggy summits edging into the falling cloud deck. In the rearview mirror, Jack eyed the dust clouds a mile back, and when he squinted, raised the half dozen trucks contained within them.

They passed the remnants of another mine, another ghost town.

The road became rocky and narrow and steep.

“Jack, you have to go faster.”

“Any faster, I’ll bounce us off the mountain.”

Naomi and Cole had unbuckled their seatbelts and they both sat up on their knees, facing the back hatch and watching the pursuing trucks.

“Get down, kids.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to get shot, Naomi.”

“Jack, come on.”

“Are they going to shoot at me, Daddy?”

“They might, Cole.”

“Why?”

Why.

The road had gone completely to hell, the Rover’s right tires passing inches from a nonexistent shoulder that plunged a hundred and fifty feet into a stream boiling with whitewater.

“Dad, I’m cold.”

“I know, sweetie. I’m sorry.”

Snow starred the windshield. A signpost appeared in the distance. Beside the words, Cinnamon Pass, which had been engraved in the wood, an arrow

pointed to a road that could hardly be called a road—just a single lane of broken rocks that switchbacked up the flank of a mountain into the clouds.

Jack took the turnoff. Snow blew in through the open windows. They climbed several hundred feet above the other road, above timberline, and as Jack negotiated the first tight switchback, that squadron of trucks emerged out of the mist below, cutting triangles of light through the falling snow.

Dee lifted the binoculars from the floorboard and leaned out the window and glassed the valley. Even without magnification, Jack could see five of the trucks veer onto the turnoff for Cinnamon Pass.

"Why's the one stopping?" he asked.

"I don't know. Let me see. A man's getting out."

"What's he—"

"Everybody get down."

"What's wrong?"

Something struck the Rover, and for a split second Jack thought the tires had thrown a rock.

A rifle shot echoed off the mountains.

"Get down on the floorboards."

The Rover shook and pitched as Jack pushed the speedometer to ten miles per hour, maneuvering to avoid the largest, sharpest rocks that jutted out of the trail. The window at Naomi's seat exploded in a shower of glass and everyone screamed and Jack shouted his daughter's name and she said that she was okay.

Another rifle shot. They climbed into the base of a cloud, Jack thinking, He's aiming for the tires, as a bullet punctured Dee's door and ripped through his seat, inches from his back.

The mist thickened. The rocks had just been wet. Now they were frosted. The snow melting and streaking the windshield and pouring into the car through the open windows. Jack thought he heard another shot over the engine, but when he glanced out Dee's window to where the valley should have been a few hundred feet below, there was only a blue-tinted mist cluttered with snowflakes that swirled and fell in disorienting profusion.

They climbed the mountainside, the road exposed, Dee and the kids still burrowed into the floorboards, Jack constantly checking the rearview mirror for headlights.

“Can we get up now?” Cole asked.

“Not yet.”

“It hurts to stay like this.”

The road leveled off and the Rover’s headlights passed over another signpost: Cinnamon Pass Elevation 12,640 Feet. Several inches of snow on everything in this tundra world. No trees or shrubs but only rock and nothing visible beyond fifty feet through the fog and pouring snow, the light more like dusk than early afternoon. In some outpost of emotion, divorced from the horror of the moment, Jack found the isolated beauty of this pass heartbreaking. The kind of wild place his father had loved to take him when he was a boy.

He brought the Rover to a stop and turned off the car and threw open his door.

“What are you doing, Jack?”

“Just checking things out. You guys can sit up now.”

He stepped down into the snow and shut his door. He strained to listen. At first, just the infinitesimal pattering of snowflakes falling on his shoulders, the ticking of the cooling engine, the wind, the invisible shifting of rocks on some obscured peak. Then he heard them—impossible to tell how far away, but the distant groan of engines became audible in the gloom below the pass, muffled by the snow. He got back into the car and cranked the engine and they went on. Jack shifted into four-wheel low. The road descending, the tires sliding on ice down the steeper grades. After two miles, shrubs appeared again. Then tiny, crooked fir trees. They dropped into a forest and a stream fell in beside the road. Still snowing here, but the snow had only begun to collect.

Jack turned off the jeep trail.

They went across a meadow and forded a stream and climbed up the bank into a grove of fir trees. He turned off the car and got out and walked back to the stream and stared across the meadow toward the road. The mist had all but dissolved in the trees. He looked back at the Rover, parked behind a grouping of blue spruce, then back to the road again. He scrambled down the bank to the edge of the stream and had started to cross over to test the soundness of their hiding place from the meadow. The rumbling chorus of engines stopped him. He went back up the bank. Dee and Cole had

gotten out of the Rover and were coming toward him. He waved them back. “The trucks are coming.”

“Can they see us from the road?”

“I don’t know.” He glanced back at the meadow, imagined he could see the Rover’s tire tracks in the dusting of snow, though he wasn’t sure. The tread had definitely bitten into the soft dirt of the bank if the men in the trucks could see that far. The engines got quiet and then loud again. “Come on,” he said. They jogged through the wet grass around the spruce trees. The Rover reeked of hot brake fluid. Jack saw Naomi lying down across the backseat, headphones in her ears. He knocked on the glass of Cole’s window. She cut her eyes up at him and he held a finger to his lips and she nodded. They crouched behind the car.

Jack said, “I’m going to find a spot where I can watch the road.”

“Can I come?”

“No, buddy, I need you to stay here and take care of Mama. I won’t be far.” He looked at Dee. “Be ready to run.”

Jack jogged back toward the stream and ducked behind a boulder that rose to his shoulders. The trees dripping. Snowing hard. He could smell the spruce. The wet rock. Already the ground was white. He poked his head around the rock as the second truck emerged from the trees. It went alongside the meadow. He said, “There are no tracks to see, just keep moving, keep moving,” and it kept moving as the third and fourth and fifth trucks rolled into view—Dodge Rams, snow-blasted except for the engine-warmed hoods and the heated cabs. He could see white faces through the fogged glass of the passenger windows. He ducked back behind the rock and sat down in the snow and studied the smooth motion of his watch’s second hand. When it had made three revolutions, the engine noises had completely faded, and the only sound was the dripping trees. The pounding of his heart.

They unloaded their camping equipment from the back of the Land Rover and Jack unpacked their tent and read its instruction manual. Spent an hour trying to assemble the poles and unravel the mystery of how the tent attached to them. The snow was ankle-deep and still falling when he finally raised the four-man dome. They carried their sleeping bags and air

cushions over from the car and tossed them inside. Dee and the kids took off their wet shoes and climbed in.

"I'll be in in a little while," Jack said. "Warm it up for me."

He zipped them in.

With the new hunting knife, Jack cut large squares out of the plastic sheeting. He wiped the snow off the windowframes, dried the wet metal with the sleeves of his shirt, and duct-taped the plastic squares over three windows on the right side of the car and a large rectangle over the back hatch. You couldn't see anything distinctly through the plastic, so he taped a piece over the intact glass of Cole's window as well.

He spent the rest of the afternoon picking Naomi's windowglass out of the backseat and the floor mats. Reorganizing everything in the cargo area. He checked the oil and washer fluid and tire pressure. When he'd finished, he looked for something else to do, needing his hands to be busy, his mind in the moment. It still snowed. He thought the sky had imperceptibly darkened, the afternoon sliding toward dusk. He hacked some limbs off a dead spruce and snapped off a few clusters of brown needles toward the base of the tree that had been shielded from the weather.

The stream was freezing. He picked a dozen fist-size rocks out of the water and stretched out his tee-shirt and loaded them all into the pouch it made. Inside the fire ring, he stacked wads of tissue paper and the browned spruce needles and a handful of twigs and enclosed them all in a framework of larger branches. Last fire he'd built had been at their home in Albuquerque the previous Christmas, and he'd cheated, used a brick of firestarter to get things going.

His hands trembled in the cold as he held the lighter to the tissue paper and struck a flame.

Later, he heard the tent unzip. Dee crawled out, stepped into her wet shoes. She walked over and stood beside him.

"I guess it literally takes the end of the world to get a family camping trip."

"I'm just trying to get a fire going so we can dry some stuff out."

A wisp of smoke lifted out of the pitiful pile of blackened twigs and half-burnt tissue paper.

“You’re shivering. Come into the tent and get some sleep. I have your sleeping bag ready for you.”

He stood, his legs cramping. He’d been squatting for over an hour.

“Are you hungry?” he said.

“Will you let me worry about dinner? Please. Go sleep.”

Jack abandoned his wet clothes in a pile in the tent’s vestibule and crawled into his sleeping bag. He could hear Dee moving around outside and he could hear the snow falling down on the rain fly. He didn’t stop shivering for a long time. His children slept. He reached over and held his hand to Cole’s chest. Rise and fall. Rise and fall. Naomi lay on the other side of Cole against the tent wall. He leaned across, his hand searching out her sleeping bag in the darkness, then finally resting on her back. Rise and fall. Rise and fall.

When he woke it was pitch black and he thought he was in his bed in the guestroom in Albuquerque. He sat up and listened. He didn’t hear his children breathing. He didn’t hear anything but the pulsing in his left ear. He reached over in the dark. The sleeping bags empty. He almost called out for them, but then thought better of it. He dressed quickly in his cold, damp clothes and unzipped the vestibule and crawled outside. It had stopped snowing, and his footsteps squeaked in the half foot of powder. Inside the Rover, light flickered through the plastic windows. He went over and opened the driver’s door and got in. Everyone in their respective seats eating out of paper bowls. A candle on the center console. “Smells good,” he said.

Dee lifted a bowl off the dashboard and handed it to him.

“It’s probably cooled off. I didn’t want to waste fuel keeping it warm.”

Tomatoes and rice, heavily seasoned, with pieces of jerky mixed in. He stirred it up and took a bite. He could hear Naomi’s iPod, and he wanted to tell her to turn it off. Ration the damn power so you can play it when you actually need a distraction. She’d forgotten to bring her charger, and when that battery died, the music was finished. But he said nothing. Pick your battles.

He glanced at his watch—a few hours later than he thought.

“This is good,” he said. “Really good.”

“I didn’t like it,” Cole said.

“Sorry, buddy. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we don’t have much food right now, so we have to be thankful for what we do have.”

“I still don’t like it.”

Dee said, “Another truck went by while you were sleeping.”

“Was the light on in here?”

“No, I heard the engine coming in time to blow it out.”

Jack finished off the bowl of rice and tomatoes. He was still hungry, figured everyone else was, too. His head pounding from caffeine deprivation.

“Where’s the water?”

Dee handed him a jug from the floorboard at her feet. He unscrewed the cap, tilted it back.

They put Naomi and Cole to bed and went across the stream together and out into the meadow. The sky had cleared. Stars shone like flecks of ice and the serrated ridge of a distant peak glowed brighter and brighter as the moon came up behind it.

Dee said, “I need to know that you have a plan, Jack.”

“We’re alive, aren’t we?”

“But where are we going? How will we stay alive?”

They walked into the road, the snow tracked through, and it suddenly dawned on Jack what they’d done.

“Shit. We aren’t thinking.” He pointed at the meadow where their footprints led back into the trees, advertising the location of their camp.

Dee pushed him hard enough to make him stumble back. “Tell me how we’re going to survive this. Tell me right now, because I don’t see it. Pure luck we weren’t all murdered today.”

“I don’t know, Dee. I couldn’t start a fucking fire with matches and tissue paper this afternoon.”

“I need to know you have a plan. Some idea of what—”

“Well, I don’t. Not yet. I just know we can’t stay here after tonight. That’s all I know.”

“Because of food.”

“Food and cold.”

“That’s not good enough, Jack.”

“What else do you want from me?”

“I want you to be a fucking man. Do what you don’t do at home. Take care of your family. Be there. Physically. Emotionally—”

“I’m trying.”

“I know. I know you are.” She sounded on the verge of tears. “I just can’t believe this is happening.”

Cole woke up crying in the night. Jack unzipped his sleeping bag, let the boy crawl inside with him.

“What’s wrong, buddy?” he whispered.

“I had a dream.”

“You’re okay. It wasn’t real.”

“It felt real.”

“You want to tell me what it was about? Sometimes, when you talk about them, nightmares don’t seem so scary.”

“You’ll be mad at me.”

“Why in the world would I be mad at you?”

“You told me not to look.”

“Did you dream about those people we saw in the street today?” He felt his little boy’s head nodding.

“You said you wouldn’t comfort me because you told me not to look.”

He wrapped his arms around Cole. “You feel that?”

“Yes.”

“I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry. I will always comfort you, Cole.”

“Can I stay in your sleeping bag?”

“You promise to go right back to sleep?”

“I promise.”

“Try not to think about all the bad stuff, all right? It’ll only give you more nightmares. Think about a happy time.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. When were you last really happy?”

The boy was quiet for a minute.

“When we went to see Grandpa.”

“You mean last summer?”

“Yeah, and he let me run through the sprinkler.”

“Then think about that, okay?”

“Okay.”

Jack held his son as the pleasing weight of sleep settled back over him, and he was beginning to dream again when Cole whispered something.

“What’d you say, buddy?”

The boy turned over and put his mouth to Jack’s right ear: “I have to tell you something else.”

“What?”

“I know why the bad people are doing it.”

“Cole, quit thinking about that stuff. Good thoughts, okay?”

“Okay.”

Jack closed his eyes.

Opened them again.

“Why, Cole?”

“What?”

“Why do you think the bad people are doing it?”

“’Cause of the lights.”

“The lights?”

“Yeah.”

“What lights? What are you talking about?”

“You know.”

“Cole, I don’t.”

“The ones I saw that night I stayed at Alex’s house, and we went outside real late with all the people.”

Something like an electrical impulse shuddered through him. Jack shut his eyes and held his palm to the shallow concavity of his son’s chest.

THEY slept long into the following day. They slept like people with no good reason to wake. As if the world to which they went to bed might become reconciled to itself, if they could only sleep a bit longer.

When Jack drove back across the stream the water came halfway up the tires. It was early afternoon, and except for where the trees threw shade, the snow had disappeared from the meadow and the ground was supple. They turned onto the road. It descended. Muddy and crisscrossed with rivulets of brown water in the sunlight. Still snowpack in the trees. They came down out of the snow and the pure stands of spruce into aspen.

In the late afternoon, the road widened and became smoother and ran along the shore of a large mountain lake. Up ahead, Jack spotted a car on the side of the road—a luxury SUV with all four doors flung open.

He sped past at fifty miles per hour.

A quick glimpse: Parents. The woman naked, her thighs red. Three children. All facedown, unmoving in the grass.

Jack glanced in the rearview mirror. Naomi and Cole hadn't noticed.

He looked over at Dee—she dozed against the plastic window.

The road went to pavement at dusk and they entered a mountain hamlet. Everything had been burned, the streets lined with the charred skeletons of houses and cars and gift shops, Jack thinking it must have been razed several days ago because nothing smoked. The air that streamed through the vents smelled like old, wet ash. His family slept. There was a field in the center of town near the school, browned and overgrown, with rusted, netless soccer goals at each end. At first, Jack thought someone had torched a mound of tires in the middle of that field until he saw a single black arm sticking up from the top of the heap.

They stabbed north into the night up a twisting, two-lane highway through the foothills of the San Juans, and they did not pass another car.

Jack pulled off the road into a picnic area beside a reservoir. They popped the back hatch of the Rover, and Dee fired up the propane-fueled camp stove and cooked a pot of chicken noodle soup from two old cans. They sat near the shore watching the moonrise and passing the steaming pot. After a night in the mountains, it felt almost warm.

"I like this better than the tomatoes and rice," Cole said. "I could eat this every day."

“Careful what you wish for,” Dee said.

Jack waved off his turn with the pot and stood up. He walked down to the edge and dipped his fingers in the water.

“Cold, Dad?” Naomi asked.

“Not too bad.”

“Why don’t you go for a swim then?”

He glanced back, grinning. “Why don’t you?”

She shook her head. He cupped a handful and tossed it back at his daughter, the water like falling glass where the moonlight passed through it.

Her screams echoed off the hills across the reservoir.

They drove west along the water.

“Where are we stopping tonight?” Dee asked.

“I wasn’t planning to. I’m not tired, and I think it might be safer to travel at night.”

It was noisy in the car, the plastic windows flapping. In the backseat, Naomi had her headphones in, eyes closed. Cole played with a pair of Hot Wheels, racing them up the back of Jack’s seat.

Jack said, “I was studying the roadmap you picked up in Silverton. I think we should head into northwest Colorado. It’s sparsely populated. Middle-of-nowhere type of place. What do you think?”

“And then where?”

“Day at a time for now. How you doing?”

She just shook her head, and he knew better than to push it.

The road traversed a dam and climbed. They followed the rim of a deep canyon. Deer everywhere, Jack stopping frequently to let them cross the road.

He pulled over after a while and the slowing of the car roused Dee from sleep.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have to pee.”

He left the car running and got out and walked to the overlook. Stood pissing between the slats of a wooden fence, looking across the canyon, which by his reckoning couldn’t have spanned more than a couple thousand feet. Down in the black bottom of the gorge, invisible in shadow, he could hear a river rushing.

The road turned north away from the canyon. They rode through dark country, no points of houselight anywhere, but the moon bright enough on the pavement for Jack to drive the long, open stretches without headlights. Miles to the south, the horizon put forth a deep orange glow. He watched the fuel gauge falling toward a quarter of a tank and thought about the phantom cries of that baby he'd heard the day before. Wondering, if they were real, what had become of it.

Late in the night, Jack reached over and patted Dee's leg. She stirred from sleep, sat up, rubbed her eyes. He said nothing, not wanting to wake the kids, but he pointed through the windshield.

City lights in the distance.

Dee leaned over and whispered into his ear, her breath soured with sleep, "Can't we just go around?"

He shook his head.

"Why?"

"We're on fumes."

"We have ten gallons in back."

"That's for emergencies."

"Jack, it's an emergency right now. Our life has become a fucking emergency."

The town was empty, but then it was almost three in the morning. The air that poured through the vents bore no trace of smoke and the houses seemed untouched, if vacant, a few even boasting porchlights.

At the intersection of highways, Jack pulled into a filling station. He stepped out and swiped his credit card and stood waiting for the machine to authorize the purchase, the night air pleasant at this lower elevation. While the super unleaded gasoline flowed into the tank, he went across the oil-stained concrete into the convenience store. The lights were on, and the empty coolers along the back wall hummed in the silence. He perused the four aisles, all heavily grazed, and emerged with a package of sunflower seeds and another quart of motor oil. The pump had gone quiet, the ticker frozen at a hair past eleven gallons. He squeezed the handle, but the lever was still depressed, the tank run dry.

With the hearing in his left ear still impaired, it took him a few seconds to get a fix on the sound. A mote of light tore up the highway toward the filling station, accompanied by the watery growl of a V-twin, two pair of headlights in tow a quarter mile back, and Dee already shouting inside the car as he yanked out the nozzle and screwed on the gas cap.

Dee had his door open and he jumped in, hands shoved into his pockets, digging for the keys.

“Jack, come on.”

Naomi sat up, blinking against the overhead dome light. “What’s going on?”

Jack fumbled the set of keys, finally got the right one between his thumb and forefinger, and fired the engine as the cycle roared up on them. He went straight at the black and chrome Harley, the rider cranking back on the throttle to avoid a collision, the bike popping up on one wheel as it surged out of the way.

Jack turned out into the highway. Back tires dragging across the pavement as he straightened their bearing.

“Get the shotgun, Dee.”

“Where is it?”

“In the way back.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt and crawled over the console into the backseat.

“Mama?”

“Everything’s okay, Cole. I just need to get something. Go back to sleep.”

Jack forced the gas pedal to the floorboard. Above the din of engine noise and the plastic windows flapping like they might rip off, Jack registered the vibration of the cycle in his gut.

“Hurry up, Dee.”

“I’m trying. It’s wedged under your pack.”

He looked in the rearview mirror—darkness specked with the diminishing lights of town. He punched off the headlights. The speedometer needle holding steady at one hundred and ten though they still accelerated. The pavement silvered under the moon and glowing just enough for him to stay between the white shoulder lines.

Dee crawled back into her seat.

“Jesus, Jack. How fast are we going?”

“You don’t want to know.”

A piece of fire bloomed and faded in the side mirror, and the square of glass exploded.

“Get down.”

The gunshot was lost to the flapping windows, but the V-twin wasn’t.

“Give me the gun, Dee.” She hoisted it up from the floorboard, barrel first. “I need you to steer.”

The cycle screamed just a few feet behind their bumper, only visible where its chrome caught glimmers of moonlight.

His foot still on the gas, Jack turned back, vertebrae cracking, and aimed through the back hatch and pumped the twelve gauge. The thunder of its report sent a spike through his left eardrum and filled the Rover with the blinding, split-second brilliance of a muzzleflash. Through the shredded plastic of the back hatch, the cycle had disappeared.

Bullets pierced the left side of the Rover, glass spraying the backseat.

Jack spun back into the driver seat, his right ear ringing, and took the steering wheel and eased off the gas.

The cycle shot forward and then its taillight blipped and it vanished.

Cole screaming in the backseat.

“Naomi, is he hurt?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I think he’s just scared.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Help him.”

“Where’s the motorcycle, Jack?”

“I don’t see it. Steer again.”

She grabbed the wheel and Jack pumped the shotgun. “I still can’t hear too well,” he said. “You have to tell me when you—”

“I hear it now.”

He strained to listen, couldn’t see for shit through the plastic window, but he did hear the cycle’s engine, the throttle winding up, and then the guttural scream was practically inside the car.

“Hold on and stay down.”

He turned back into the driver seat and clutched the wheel and hit the brake pedal and something slammed into the back of the Rover, the sickening clatter of metal striking metal, Jack punching on the headlights just in time to see the cycle turning end over end as it somersaulted off the road into darkness, throwing sparks every time the metal met the pavement, the rider deposited on the double yellow thirty yards ahead, the man sitting dazed and staring at his left arm which dangled fingerless and unhinged from his elbow, his unhelmeted head scalped to the bone.

Jack struck the man at fifty-five. The Rover shook violently for several seconds, as if running a succession of speedbumps, and then the pavement flowed smoothly under the tires again.

He killed the lights and pushed the Rover past a hundred, watching Dee's side mirror for tailing cars. When the road made a sharp turn, he slowed and eased off the shoulder down a gentle embankment and turned off the car.

Cole wept hysterically.

"It's okay, buddy," Jack said. "It's okay. We're all right now."

"I want to go home. I want to go home now."

Dee climbed into the back and swept the broken glass off the leather seat and took Cole up into her arms.

"I know," she whispered. "I know. I want to go home, too, but we can't just yet."

"Why?"

"Because it's not safe."

"When can we?"

"I don't know yet."

Jack glanced back and before the overhead light cut out, saw Naomi's chin quivering, too.

He opened his door, said, "I'll be right back."

He crawled through the grass up the embankment and lay on his stomach in the shadow of an overhanging cottonwood at the shoulder's edge, his heart beating against the ground, listening. He could still hear Cole crying, Dee hushing him like she had when he was a baby. He wiped his eyes. Hands shaking. Cold. The highway silent.

They came so suddenly he didn't have time to roll back down the hill—two cars tearing around the corner, no headlights, tires squealing, one of them passing within a foot of his head.

They raced on into darkness, invisible, the groan of their engines slowly fading.

Jack had dust in his eyes and grit between his teeth and the odor of burnt rubber was everywhere.

AT dawn, they entered the largest city they'd seen since Albuquerque. The lights were still on. Gas stations beckoned. They undercut an empty interstate, Jack keeping their speed above sixty, and soon the city dwindled away behind them, him watching the image of it shrink in the only reflection left—the cracked side mirror on Dee's door.

They crested a pass. A small weather station beside the road. Fragile light on this minor range of green foothills. That city thirty miles back and to the south, its lights glittering in the desert. A distant range to the west with still a few minutes of night left to go. Jack was beyond exhaustion, shoulder aching from the twelve-gauge kick, his children awake, staring into the plastic of their respective windows. Catatonic. Dee snored softly.

They rode down from the pass and out of the pines into empty, arid country. As the sun edged up on the world, Jack saw the building in the distance. He took his foot off the accelerator.

The motel had been long abandoned, its name bleached out of the thirty-foot billboard that stood teetering beside the road. Dee stirred and sat up as Jack veered off the highway onto the fractured pavement.

"Why are you stopping?"

"I have to sleep."

"Want me to drive some?"

"No, let's stay off the road today."

He pulled around to the back of the building and turned off the engine.

Stillness. The cathedral quiet of the high desert.

Jack looked at the gas gauge—between a quarter and a half. He studied the odometer.

"Five hundred and fifty-two miles," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

“How far we’ve come from home.”

The room had two double beds. A dresser. An old television with a busted screen. Graffitied walls. Tied-off and shriveled condoms on the carpet and a bathtub full of shattered beer bottles. Jack carefully turned back the rotting covers so as not to disturb the dust, and they lay their sleeping bags on the old sheets—Jack and Cole on one bed, the girls on the other—and fell asleep as the sun rose.

He sat up suddenly. His wife stood over him. Dust trembling off the ceiling. A glass ashtray rattling across the bedside table.

“Jack, something’s happening.”

They parted the curtains and climbed over the rusted AC wall unit through the open windowframe. Midday light beat down on the desert and the ground vibrated beneath their feet, the inconceivable noise shaking jags of glass out of other windows, doors quivering in their frames. They walked over to the motel office and Jack ventured a glance around the corner of the building.

On the road, a convoy rolled by—SUVs, luxury sedans, beater trucks with armed men riding in the beds, jeeps, fuel trucks, school buses, all moving by at a modest speed and raising a substantial cloud of dust in their collective passing.

Jack turned back to Dee, said into her ear, “I don’t think they can see our car from the road.”

Another five minutes crept by, Jack and Dee standing against the crumbling concrete of the motel until the last car in the convoy had passed, the drone of several hundred engines fading more slowly than Jack would have thought.

Dee said, “What if we’d been traveling south on this road?”

“We’d have seen them from miles away.”

“With the binoculars?”

“Yeah.”

“What if the kids and I were sleeping and you weren’t looking through the—”

“Don’t do this, Dee. They didn’t see us. We weren’t on the road.”

“But we could have been.” She bit her bottom lip and stared east toward a rise of low brown hills. “We have to be more careful,” she said. “We have to always be thinking the worst. I can’t watch my children—”

“Stop it.”

Dee walked along the brick and peered around the corner.

“Still see them?” Jack asked.

“Yeah. Sun’s reflecting off all that chrome.”

Jack didn’t hear the engines anymore.

Dee said, “They’re getting organized, aren’t they?”

“Seems that way.”

He stepped forward and looked with her. The convoy miles away now, like the long and shining trail of a snail.

Naomi and Cole slept in the motel room. Jack and Dee sat outside on the concrete walkway, watching the light slant across the desert.

Dee held her BlackBerry in her hand, said, “Still no signal.”

“Who you trying to call, your sister?”

She started to cry, and he didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing, just put his arm around her for the first time in months. He thought about the last time he’d spoken to his father. A week ago. Sunday morning on the telephone. Sitting on the screened back porch and watching the lawn sprinklers water the fescue. Sipping on a mug of black coffee. They’d talked about the coming election and a movie they’d both seen and the World Series. When the time had come to hang up, he’d said, “I’ll talk to you next weekend, Pop,” and his father had said, “Well, all right then. You take care, son.” Same way they always ended their phone calls. What killed him was that it hadn’t, in any way, felt like the last time they would ever speak.

They changed out of their three-day-old clothes, and Dee lit the campstove and brought the last two cans of old vegetable soup to a simmer. Sat in the darkening motel room passing the cooling pot and the last jug of water.

At dusk, he stood in the middle of the road with a pair of binoculars, glassing the high desert.

South: nothing.

North: no movement save a handful of pumpjacks that dotted the landscape and ominous lines of black smoke ascending out of the far horizon.

He turned at the sound of approaching footfalls. Naomi stepped into the road and pushed her chin-length yellow hair out of her face. The dark eyeliner she always wore had faded, she'd taken the silver studs out of her ears, and he thought how she looked like his little girl again yet older, her features sharpening into the Germanic, Midwestern prettiness that had begun to desert Dee. He couldn't remember the last time she'd let him hold her, or if he was honest, the last time he'd wanted to. He'd lost sight of his daughter amid the angst and the Goth façade, and he saw, not for the first time, but for the first time with clarity, how in the last two years he'd become a stranger to the two most important women in his life.

"What's going on?" Naomi asked.

"Just having a look around."

She stood beside him, dragged the soles of her black Chuck Taylors across the pavement.

"What do you think about all this?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"You worried about your friends?"

"I guess. You think Grandpa's okay?"

"No way to know. I hope he is." He wanted to put his arms around her. Restrained himself. "I'm really proud of how you're taking care of your brother, Na. As proud as I've ever been of you. Your being brave is helping Cole to be brave."

She nodded, but he could see tears shivering in her eyes. He drew her suddenly into him and she wrapped her arms around his waist and cried hard into his chest.

With the Rover packed, they climbed in and took their seats and Jack started the engine. The desert deepening from blue into purple as they pulled out of the motel parking lot and into the highway, the stars fading in and the moon rising over the hills.

They went north without headlights, and within a half hour, had come upon the town. Everywhere, houses burned, and the dead lay in the road

and the sidestreets and the front yards. Jack made himself stop counting.

“Don’t look out the windows,” he warned, and this time, his children listened.

The town had lost power.

Jack punched on the headlights.

“Don’t.”

“I can’t see.”

Smoke streamed through the lightbeams and filled the car.

The highway became Main Street. They passed between old buildings and a couple of restaurants and a dark marquee advertising a pair of films that had been released months ago.

A few blocks past the downtown, he turned off the highway into the parking lot of a grocery store and stopped the Rover in the fire lane by the entrance.

“Jack, please, let’s just get the hell out of here.”

“We’re out of food. Almost out of water. I have to look.”

He turned off the car and reached under his seat, grabbed the Glock. “Dee, you have the flashlight?”

She set it in his lap.

“Don’t leave, Daddy.”

“I’ll be right back, buddy.” He touched Dee’s leg. “Anything happens, you lay on this horn and I’ll be here in five seconds.”

The automatic doors stood a foot apart. He squeezed through, hesitating. Every part of him protesting against this. He flicked on the Mag-Lite and made himself go on, thinking how it didn’t smell anything like a grocery store should. A tinge of rust and rot hanging in the air. He dislodged a cart from the brood of buggies and set the gun in the child’s seat. Started forward, the wheels rattling, one squeaking, his light playing off the registers. He passed through the self-checkout aisle. No sound but the distant voltage in his left ear which hummed like a substation.

He pushed the buggy toward produce. The shelves bare but still carrying the smell of vegetables and fruit. Ten feet ahead, a man lay beside empty wooden crates. The blood around him shimmering off the linoleum like black ice under the lightbeam. Jack stopped the cart. There were others behind this man and though he wouldn’t put his light directly on them, he

stared at what the shadows didn’t hide. The closest: a woman facing him with her eyes still open, long yellow hair matted to the gore that had been bludgeoned out of her head.

He picked a cluster of overripe bananas off the floor, the only offering of produce, and pushed the cart between the dead. The wheels went quiet, greased with blood. Dark shoeprints tracked through double doors into the back of the store. He took the gun and left the cart and pushed through them, swinging his light across pallets of stock that had already been scavenged of anything resembling food. Only packages of toilet paper remaining. He shined the light on the concrete floor and followed the bloody tracks to where they ended. There were over a hundred brass casings and spent shotgun shells in the vicinity of the freezer’s big silver door, and massive quantities of blood had leaked out from underneath it. He started to pull it open. Stopped himself.

He walked back out into the store and put his hands on the cart. The rear of the supermarket stunk of spoiled meat. As he rounded a corner into the first aisle, the cart bumped into a young child who had been hacked to pieces, a single neck tendon shy of a full decapitation. Jack turned and vomited into a naked shelf, stood spitting until his mouth quit watering. He’d seen a few frames of horror since Thursday night, but nothing like this. He tried to shove it into the back of his unconscious, but its shape wouldn’t fit anywhere. Beyond all comprehension.

He went on. Searching the shelves for anything, finding nothing but a gallon of water and more bodies to steer around. He rolled past empty glass cases that had held frozen meals, and then turned into the last aisle of the store, the beam of his Mag-Lite illuminating someone sitting up against a shelf lined with cartons of room-temperature milk. The teenage boy’s eyes opened, milky and failing to dilate at the onslaught of light. He held his belly as if trying to keep something in.

Jack left the cart and walked over to the boundary of where the blood had pooled. He squatted down. The boy’s respirations coming labored and sodden. He ran his tongue across his dried and cracking lips and said, “Water.”

Jack went to the buggy and rolled it back over and set the flashlight beside the gun. He broke the seal and twisted off the cap and held the mouth of the jug to the boy’s lips. He drank. A skinny, long-legged kid. Black

denim jeans and a western shirt. He turned away from the water and drew a breath.

“You got to take me to Junction. I ain’t going to make it through tonight.” The boy looked off into the darkness. “Where’s Mama?”

“I don’t know.”

Jack got up.

“Where you going?”

“I have my family waiting outside.”

“Don’t leave me, mister.”

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do for you.”

“You got a gun?”

“What?”

“A gun.”

“Yeah.”

“You can shoot me.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“I can’t just sit here in the dark. Please shoot me in the head. You can do that for me. I’d be so grateful. You got no concept how this hurts.”

Jack lifted the jug of water.

“Don’t leave me, mister.”

He took the gun from the cart and jammed it down the back of his waistband. He tucked the bananas under his right arm and grabbed the flashlight and started walking up the aisle toward the front of the store.

“You son of a bitch,” the boy called after him, crying now.

They stopped at a filling station on the outskirts but the pumps were dry. Jack checked the oil and washed the filthy windshield and they headed north out of town into the high desert. The night clear and cold and nothing else on the road save the occasional mule deer. They ate the bananas—too soft and reeking of that oversweet candy stench of fruit that has just begun to turn—and Jack let them split his share. The two hamlets they passed through barely warranted the black specks they’d been assigned on the map—tiny ranching communities, burned and vacated. The most substantive structure for miles was a grain mill, looming above the desert like some improbable skyline.

Jack pulled off onto the side of the road to let Cole and Naomi have a bathroom break, and when the kids were out of the car, Dee said, “What’s wrong, Jack?”

He looked at her, glad when the overhead light cut off.

“Nothing. I mean, you know, besides everything.”

“What’d you see in that grocery store?”

He shook his head.

“Jack. We together in this?”

“Of course. That doesn’t mean you need to have me putting things in your head that you can’t get rid of.” As his eyes readjusted to the darkness, he looked through the windshield at a range of hills in the east. Heard a sudden shriek of laughter from Cole that almost made him smile.

Dee said, “Don’t push me away. I need to share this experience with you. I want to know what you know, Jack. Every single thing, because there’s comfort in it. I need that.”

“Not this, you don’t.”

Five miles on, Jack pulled off the road again, said, “Give me the binoculars.”

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

“I saw something.”

“What?”

“Lights. Everyone just sit still and don’t open your doors.”

“Why?”

“Because the interior lights will come on, and I don’t want anyone to see where we are.”

“What if they see us? What will happen?”

“Nothing good, Cole.”

Dee handed him the binoculars and he brought the eyecups to his eyes. At first, nothing but black, and he thought maybe the focus had been jarred, but then he picked them up again, stretched along the road like a stateless strand of Christmas lights.

“You just sighed. What is it, Jack?”

He moved the knob, pulled everything into focus. “The convoy.”

“Oh, God.”

“I think they’re moving away from us.”

“Can you tell how far?”

“Maybe ten miles. I don’t know.”

“And you’re sure they’re not coming toward us?”

He lowered the binoculars. “Let’s wait here awhile. Track their movement. Make absolutely certain.”

Jack glassed the convoy through the windshield, watching its slow progression away from them while the kids played Rock, Paper, Scissors.

Within the hour, the lights had vanished.

Heat blasted out of the vents to check the frigid air that streamed through rips in the plastic windows, Naomi and Cole bundled in their sleeping bags and huddled miserably together.

Just before midnight, Jack turned off the highway onto a dirt road and punched on the headlights.

They’d gone several miles when Dee leaned across the center console, and then back into her seat, pushing a discreet exhalation through her teeth that no one but her husband would have caught. The opening move in a battle they’d fought before.

“What?”

“You see the light?” she said.

“Yes, I see it.”

“Do you think there’s going to be a gas station out here?” She gestured toward the windshield and the expanse of empty country beyond the glass, devoid of even a spore of manmade light.

“It just came on a minute ago.”

“It means we’re out of gas, darling-heart.”

“No, it means we can still go for twenty-five miles. It’s called a reserve tank.”

He could feel the heat of her stare even in the dark.

She said, “We have ten gallons of gas sloshing around back there, and I don’t understand why you won’t—”

“Dee, it’s—”

“Oh my God, if you say it’s for emergencies one more. . .” She turned away from him. Stared into the plastic of her window. Jack on the brink of

just pulling over, an act of appeasement he would never have considered under any other circumstance, when the headlights grazed a dark house.

He turned into the gravel drive and parked beside a powder-blue Chevy pickup truck from another time, headlights firing across a brick ranch with white columns on the porch.

“Let’s not stop here, Jack.”

“We have to take a look.”

Jack and Dee followed the stone path to the house and stepped up onto the front porch and knocked on the door. They waited. Heard nothing on the other side.

“Nobody’s home,” Jack said.

“Or maybe they saw a man walking up to their house with a shotgun and they’re waiting on the other side with a fucking arsenal.”

“Always the pessimist.” He knocked again and tried the door.

Jack pried a large, flat piece of sandstone out of the walkway and lobbed it through the dining room window. They crouched in the cedar chips and listened. A stalactite of glass fell out of the framing. Silence followed.

“I’ll go in,” Jack said, “make sure it’s safe.”

“What if it’s not?”

He reached into his pocket, handed her the keys. “Then you get the hell out of here.”

Standing in the dining room, the first thing to strike him was the warmth. He walked into the kitchen. The refrigerator humming. He opened it. Jars of mayonnaise and other storebought condiments and a mason jar of pickled beets and something wrapped in tinfoil. He went to the sink and turned on the tap. Water flowed.

Dee sat in the Rover in the driver seat, her hands on the steering wheel. He opened the door, said, “It’s empty and they have power.”

“Food?”

“There’s some stuff in the cabinets.” He looked into the backseat. “Na and Cole, I want you to bring all the empty jugs inside.”

Jack went around to the side of the house. He unsheathed his bowie and sawed off the nozzle to the garden hose. He unwound it and cut a six-foot length of green tubing. The opening to the Chevy's gas tank was next to the driver-side door, a silver cap speckled with rust that took some hard cranking to unscrew. He'd already poured the five-gallon cans into the Rover, and they sat open on the gravel drive while he threaded the hose through the hole. It touched the bottom of the tank, the smell already wafting out of the end of the tube as he brought it to his lips.

The gas was oily in his mouth—sharp, pungent, and dirty. He spit it out and jammed the hose into the first gas can, his eyes watering, throat burning from the fumes.

Jack walked past the eight jugs of water lined up on the kitchen island. He leaned down into the sink and held his mouth under the open tap for a long time but there was no flushing of the gasoline which lingered in the back of his throat like persistent fog.

"How'd we do?" Dee asked.

He stood up, lightheaded. "Six gallons."

"You all right?"

"I just need about fifty breath mints."

Naomi said, "Come look what we found, Dad."

He followed them across the wood laminate floor to a sliding glass door behind the breakfast nook. The vertical blinds had been swept back and he looked through the glass into a square of domesticated yard, moonlit and bordered by desert. He saw a dilapidated swingset, a pair of lawn chairs shaded by an umbrella, and closer to the house, a thirty-foot steel antenna mast.

Naomi flipped through the channels on a mammoth television set that looked like it had occupied the same patch of shag carpeting for thirty years. Every station drowned in static.

Jack lifted a telephone, held the receiver to his ear. Silence.

They walked down the hallway, the hardwood groaning under their footsteps.

"Can't we turn some lights on? I don't like it dark."

"Lights might attract someone, Cole."

“You mean like someone bad?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you think these people went?” Naomi asked.

“No telling. Probably just left their home like we left ours.”

Jack shined his flashlight through the first doorway they passed. A bedroom with two trophy cases and a large photograph above the headboard—a teenage boy riding an enraged bull.

They went on.

Naomi said, “Something smells bad.”

Jack stopped. He smelled it, too. Sharp enough to overpower the gasoline overload in his nasal cavity.

Dee said, “Kids, let’s go back to the kitchen.”

Naomi said, “What’s wrong?”

“Go with your mother.”

“Come on, guys. Jack, be careful.”

“Is it—”

“Na, think about your brother before you say another word.”

“What about me?”

“Come on, Cole, let’s go with Mom.”

Jack watched his family retreat and then turned back toward the closed door at the end of the hall, the smell intensifying with each step. He breathed through his mouth as he turned the doorknob and shined the light inside.

A man and a woman lay in bed. White-haired. Seventy-something. Framed photographs of what he presumed were their grown sons resting on their stomachs. The woman had been shot through the forehead, and the man cradled her to himself, a hole in his right temple, his right arm outstretched and hanging off the bed, a revolver of some caliber on the floor below his hand. The white comforter darkened with blood. Above the bed, Jack put his light on a series of fifty-one photographs that, in the lowlight, looked almost identical. He moved closer. The last photograph of the montage was a recent portrait of the couple on the bed, the man wearing an oversize tuxedo that swallowed him whole, the woman squeezed into a ragged wedding dress many sizes too small, and as Jack ran his light back through the portraits, the couple grew younger and their wedding clothes fit better and their smiles brightened toward something like hope.

Jack walked into the kitchen, found Dee and Naomi standing around the island, drinking from glasses of ice water. In the living room, Cole flipped through channels of static on the television.

“Everything all right?” Dee said.

“They weren’t murdered. He shot her and then himself.”

“Can I see?”

“Why would you want to, Na?”

She shrugged. “You saw it.”

“I had to make sure everything was safe for us. I wish I hadn’t seen it.”

Jack found the radio setup in the den—a low-band rig, microphone, headphones, power meter. The room had no windows, so he turned on the desk lamp and settled into a cracking leather chair. The amateur radio license hanging on the wall above the equipment had been issued to Ronald M. Schirard, callsign KE5UTN.

“What’s all this stuff?” Naomi said.

“It’s a ham radio.”

“What’s it do?”

“Let’s you talk to people all over the world.”

“Isn’t that what cell phones are for?”

Dee said, “You know how to use this?”

“I had a friend in high school whose Dad was a ham. We’d sneak down into the basement at night and use his radio. But this equipment looks way more sophisticated.” He turned on the transreceiver and the microphone and put on the headset. The radio had been tuned to 146.840 megahurtz, and he didn’t tinker with it, just keyed the microphone.

“This is KE5UTN listening on the 146.840 machine.”

Thirty seconds of silence.

He restated the callsign and repeater identification, then glanced up at Dee. “This may take some time.”

Dee came back after a half hour and set a cup of coffee on the desk. Jack didn’t remove the headphones, just said, “Thanks, but I can’t go through caffeine withdrawal again.”

“Anything?”

“Not a word.”

An hour later and still no response, he finally reached for the dial to change the receiver frequency.

A voice crackled over the airwaves.

“KE5UTN? This is EI1465.” Heavy Irish accent.

Jack keyed the mic. “This is KE5UTN. Who am I speaking with please?”

“Ron? Thank God, I thought something had happened.”

“No, this is Jack Colclough.”

“Where’s Ron Schirard? You’re using his callsign.”

“I’m in his house, on his station.”

“Where’s Ron, mate?”

Jack heard the door open behind him. Glanced back, saw Dee walk in. He said, “You a friend of Ron’s?”

“Never met him, but we’ve been talking on the radio going on nine years.”

Jack hesitated.

“Mr. Colclough? Is my modulation off?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but Ron and his wife are dead. Where are you, if I may ask?”

The silence in the headphones went on for a long while, and the voice finally returned much softer.

“Belfast. What are you doing in Ron’s house?”

“We fled our home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, three days ago, and just stopped here to look for supplies. Cell phones don’t work. Or landlines. There’s no internet. Do you have any information about what’s happening? Has it spread worldwide?”

“No, it’s only the lower forty-eight states of America, southern Canada, and northern Mexico. There aren’t too many reports coming out of the affected region, but you’ve heard about New England?”

“We’ve heard nothing.”

“Boston and New York have been devastated. Total chaos. Astronomical death tolls. There’s a handful of videos circulating—movies shot on mobile phones. Streets clogged with bodies. People trying to flee the cities. Real doomsday stuff. Are you and your family okay?”

“We’re alive.”

“You’re lucky to be in a low population-density area.”

Jack glanced up at Dee, said, “You should really be keeping a lookout in case someone comes.”

“Naomi’s on the front porch watching the road.”

Jack keyed the mic. “Has anyone figured out what’s causing this?”

“Well, there have been a lot of crazy theories put out there, but over the last day or so, everyone’s been focusing on this atmospheric phenomenon that happened over America about a month ago.”

“You mean the aurora?”

“Exactly. The talking-heads have been blathering on about mass extinctions, that this is what wiped out the dinosaurs, that it triggered a latent genetic defect in a percentage of the population. Mind you, I’m just regurgitating what I’ve heard on the tele. They’re probably full of shite.”

“Has everyone who witnessed the aurora become affected?”

“I don’t know. Did you see it?”

“No. My family. . .we slept through it.”

“Lucky for you, I guess.”

“Look, where’s the closest safe zone?”

“Southern Canada. They’re setting up refugee camps there. How far away are you?”

Jack felt something in him deflate. “A thousand miles. Anything else you can tell us about what’s going on? We’re blind here.”

“Nothing that would cheer you up.”

“I don’t think I got your name.”

“Matthew Hewson. Matt.”

“I’m sorry about your friend, Matt.”

“Me, too. How many souls in your family, Jack?”

“Four. I have a son and a daughter.”

“When I go to mass tonight, I’ll light a candle for each of you. I know it isn’t much, but maybe it is.”

Jack opened the door and walked out onto the front porch. Naomi sat on the steps, and he eased down beside her. The night cold. A lonely cricket chirping out in the yard and not another sound on the high desert. Not even wind.

“Mom told me we have to leave.”

“Yeah. I just don’t think we’re safe here. This house is the only—”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t want to sleep in a house with dead people in it.”

“Well, there’s that.”

“I went and looked at them.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Why’d they kill themselves you think? ’Cause of what’s happening?”

“Probably.”

“That’s weak.”

“The Schirards had put together a good life for themselves, Na. Been married a lot of years. They were old. Not capable of running. I’m not sure I’d call what they did weak.”

“Would you do it?”

“Of course not. I have you and Cole and—”

“But if something happened to us and it was just you. Or just you and Mom.”

He stared at his daughter in the darkness. “That isn’t something I ever want to think about.”

Dee and the kids loaded water jugs into the Land Rover, and Jack poured the six gallons he’d siphoned out of the Chevy into their gas tank. They were underway a little after three. Traveling north with the highbeams blazing like flamethrowers to ward off the riot of deer and antelope that continually shot across the road. It hadn’t rained here in weeks, possibly a month, and from the gravel, their passage raised a trail of moonlit dust that never quite seemed to settle.

They climbed a series of plateaus and crossed into Wyoming at four. The road went back to pavement and Dee cracked open the pickled beets, fed one to Jack, handed the glass jar into the backseat.

“What is this?” Naomi asked.

“Beets. Try one.”

She sniffed the open jar and winced. “That’s disgusting, Mom.”

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“Yeah, but that’s like, haven’t-eaten-in-a-week, on-the-verge-of-death food.”

“Cole?”

“He’s asleep.”

Jack kept watching the eastern sky, and when he saw the first hint of light his stomach released a shimmer of heat.

Dee must have noticed, too, because she said, “Where are we going to stop?”

“Other side of Rock Springs.”

“We have to go through another city?”

“Last one for a long time.” Jack glanced into the backseat, said, “Look.” Cole had slumped over into Naomi’s lap, and his sister leaned against the door, asleep, her fingers tangled up in his hair.

A tremor shook the Rover.

Jack studied the dash.

“We’re losing oil,” he said. “Engine’s running hot.”

“How many quarts do we have?”

“Two, but I don’t want to use them yet.”

Dawn crept over a bleak waste of countryside. They could see for seventy miles to the east—a treeless, waterless, uninhabitable piece of ground.

Jack punched off the headlights.

THEY rolled through Rock Springs. The city had lost power. Streets empty. No one out. Jack eased to a stop at a vacant intersection, purely out of habit, and stared for a moment at the dark traffic signals. He lowered his window, listened to the harsh idle of the V8. Killed the engine.

Silence flooded in, and not just the dawn-quiet of a waking town.

“Everyone left,” he said.

Across the street, the automated doors of a City Market grocery store had been leveled, like a truck had driven through. Jack opened his door, stepped down onto the road, dropped to his knees, stared up into the Rover’s undercarriage.

Nothing to see in the poor light but a tiny pond of oil on the asphalt whose reflection of the morning sky shook with each new drop.

The highway north out of Rock Springs was a straight shot into high desert. There were mountains to the northeast that after seventy miles became mountains to the east. The sun appeared behind them and made the quartz in the pavement glimmer.

“We should find a place to stop,” Dee said. “It’s almost seven.”

“Minute you see a tree, speak up.”

They drove on, Jack thinking this was such a quintessential highway of the American West. Long vistas. Emptiness. Desert in the foreground, mountains beyond. Both sagebrush and snow within eyeshot.

When Dee drew a sudden breath, Jack felt his stomach fall, on the verge of asking for the binoculars, but he didn’t even need them now as the sun cleared that thirteen thousand-foot wall of granite twenty miles to the east and struck the oncoming procession of chrome and glass.

Dee took the binoculars out of the glove box, glassed the desert.

“How far?”

“Five, ten miles, I don’t know.”

Jack stepped on the brake, brought the Rover almost to a stop, and veered off the highway into the desert.

“What the fuck, Jack?”

“See what we’re heading for?”

Several miles east, a butte rose two hundred feet above the desert floor.

“Are you crazy?”

“We’d never make it back to Rock Springs on less than a quarter of a tank, which is where we’re at.”

“So you’re going to take us behind that butte.”

“Exactly.”

“Then go faster.”

“Christ, you’re bossy. I’m going as slow as I can so we don’t raise a trail of dust they can follow.”

Naomi lifted her head off the door. “Why’s it so bumpy?”

“We’re taking a detour, angel.”

“Why?”

“Cars coming.” Jack swerved to miss a sagebrush. “We making a dust cloud?”

Dee opened her door, leaned out, glanced back. “Little one.”

The butte grew bigger in the windshield—sunburnt strata of rock that rose to a flat-topped summit. The desert running like warped and shattered concrete under the tires and shaking the Rover all to hell.

“We’re running really hot,” Jack said. Kept searching for the road in his side mirror, kept forgetting the mirror had been shot out two nights ago.

“Where are they?” Naomi asked.

“We can’t see them from here,” Dee said. “Hopefully, they can’t see us.”

They rode into the shadow of the butte, Jack skirting the circumference until they reached the back side which had been fired into pink by the early sun.

He slammed the Rover into park, turned off the engine.

“Binoculars.”

Dee handed them over and he threw open the door and hopped down onto the hardpan. Ran up the lower slope of the butte, his quads burning after ten steps, perspiration beading on his forehead after twenty.

Where the slope went vertical for the last fifty feet, he traversed along the edge of the cliff band and had just caught his breath when the highway came into view.

His knees hit the dirt. Jack lowered himself and propped his elbows on the ground, still cold from the previous night. Brought the binoculars’ eyecups to his eyes, pulled the highway into focus, and slowly traced it north.

Footfalls behind him.

He inhaled a severely faded waft of Dee’s shampoo as she collapsed panting in the dirt.

“You see them?” she asked.

He did. An eighteen-wheeler led the convoy, puffing gouts of black smoke into the air and followed by a train of cars and trucks that might have been a mile long. Five hundred engines sounded otherworldly carrying across the desert.

“Jack?”

“Yeah, I see them.”

“What about our trail?”

He lowered the binoculars and looked to where he thought they’d cut across the desert and lifted them to his eyes again. First thing he fixed upon

were a pair of antelope standing motionless with their heads raised, staring toward the noise of what was coming.

He adjusted the focus knob, spotted their tire tracks.

“I see our path. I don’t see any dust.”

The convoy had begun to pass the point on the highway where they’d turned off.

Jack said, “They’re not stopping.”

He lowered the binoculars.

“What are we going to do, Jack, when the gas runs out?”

“We’ll find some before that happens.”

“You said there aren’t any other cities for a—”

“We’ll have to get lucky.”

“What if we don’t—”

“Dee, what do you want me to say? I don’t know what’s going to—”

“Look.” She grabbed the binoculars from him and turned his head toward the ribbons of dust that were unspooling across the desert behind two trucks.

Jack descended the butte at a sprint, Dee calling after him, but he didn’t stop until he reached the Rover.

Popped the cargo hatch, grabbed the shotgun, felt confident he’d replaced the spent shell yesterday afternoon at the motel. Wondered if that meant he had eight rounds, though he couldn’t be sure.

“Dad?” Naomi said.

“Cole awake?”

“No.”

“Wake him.”

“Are people coming?”

“Yes.”

Dee arrived breathless as he opened his door and took the Glock from underneath the driver seat and a handful of twelve-gauge shells from the center console.

“Jack, let’s just get in the car and go. Make them catch us.”

He jammed the shells into his pocket.

Cole whined, “I’m hungry.”

Jack thinking this was one of those choices where if you took the wrong road, there’d be no chance to undo it. They’d be dead. His son and his

daughter and his wife and him too if he was so lucky.

“Jack.”

He looked over Dee’s head to where the desert sloped up to the base of the butte.

“Naomi, you see that large boulder fifty yards up the hill?”

“Where?”

Jack punched through the plastic window and tore it off the door. “There.”

“Jack, no.”

“Take your brother up there and hide behind the rock. No matter what happens, what you see or hear, don’t move, don’t make a sound, until we come get you.”

“What if you don’t?”

“We will.”

“I’m hungry,” Cole cried, eyes still half-closed, not fully awake.

“Go with your sister, buddy. We’ll eat something when you come back.”

“No, now.”

“Get him up that hill, Na, and keep him with you.” He faced Dee, her eyes welling.

“You sure about this, Jack?”

“Yes.” What a lie.

Naomi dragged Cole out of the car, but the boy fell crying to the ground, and he wouldn’t get up.

Jack squatted down in the dirt.

“Look at me, son.” He held the boy’s face in his hands.

“I’m hungry.”

He slapped Cole.

The boy went clear-eyed and hushed, stared at his father, tears running down his face.

“Shut up, and go with your sister right now, or you’re going to get us all fucking killed.” He’d never sworn at his son, never laid a hand on him before.

Cole nodded.

Naomi helped her brother to his feet and Jack watched as they jogged up the slope together, hand-in-hand. Jack looked at his wife. “Come on.”

They ran south for sixty or seventy yards, and then Jack pulled Dee down behind a piece of rock the size of a minivan that had calved off from the butte in another epoch.

Already Jack could hear the growl of an approaching engine.

Dee visibly trembling.

A Jeep appeared around the corner of the butte, kicking streamers of dust in its wake as the driver downshifted.

“Where’s the other truck, Jack?” He glanced back toward the Rover, didn’t see it coming.

“Stay here.”

“Where are you going?”

The Jeep sped toward them on a trajectory that would bring it past the boulder by twenty or thirty feet.

He stood. “Here.” Handed her the Glock. “Don’t move from this spot.”

Jack racked the slide and stepped out from behind the boulder and ran. Three men in the Jeep, and the one in back standing on the seat and holding onto the roll bar and a rifle, his long black hair blowing back. Jack slid to a stop in the dirt and pulled the stock into his shoulder and fired before they ever saw him. The driver started bleeding from several holes in his face and the long-haired man fell backward out of the Jeep into a sagebrush. Jack pumped the shotgun and got off another round as the Jeep drew even with him, registered a muzzleflash from the front passenger seat at the same instant the buckshot punched the third man out of the doorless Jeep, which veered sharply away and accelerated into the desert, the driver’s head bobbling off the steering wheel.

Dee shouted his name, and as he turned, fire blossomed in his left shoulder, coupled with a wave of nausea. A Ford F-150, beat to hell and coated in dust, rounded the north side of the butte. Jack sprinted back up the slope to Dee and crouched down beside her.

“How in the world did you just do that?” she asked.

“No idea.”

He dug two cartridges out of his pocket and fed them into the magazine tube and jacked a shell into the chamber.

The F-150 skidded to a stop beside the Rover. Two women jumped down out of the bed. Two men climbed out of the cab.

“Take this.” He gave her the shotgun, took back the Glock.

“You’re bleeding.”

“I know, I’m—”

“No, I mean you’re really bleeding.”

“Run like hell toward those mountains. When they follow, lay down in the dirt and let them get close and then open fire. Shoot, pump, shoot. Pump it hard. You won’t break it.”

“Jack.” She was crying now.

“They are going to kill our children.”

She stood and started down the slope into the desert.

He looked down at the Glock in his hand which felt so small and held not a fraction of that devastating twelve-gauge reassurance.

Then he was running across the slope, couldn’t feel his legs or the bullet in his shoulder, nothing but the shudder of his heart banging against his chest plate. He saw Dee being chased by two people into the desert and a man with a large revolver following a woman uphill toward the boulder where his children hid.

The man stopped and looked at Jack and raised his gun.

Between the two of them, they exchanged a dozen rounds that never came close to hitting anything.

The slide on Jack’s .45 locked back, the man struggling to break open the cylinder of his revolver, and the woman had nearly reached the boulder. She was thirty-something, blond, and holding an ax under the blade. Naomi and Cole still huddled behind the rock, Jack twenty yards away and moving toward them now at a dead run.

Shotgun reports tore out of the desert.

The woman disappeared behind the far side of the boulder and Jack screamed at his daughter to move over the roar of another shotgun blast.

The blonde emerged behind his children, hoisted the ax.

He crashed into her at full speed and drove her hard into the ground. Grabbed the first decent rock within reach and before he’d even thought about what he was doing, he’d broken open the woman’s skull with seven crushing blows.

Jack wiped her blood out of his eyes, picked up the Glock, and went to his children.

Naomi wept hysterically, holding her brother in her arms, shielding him.

The woman twitched in the dirt.

Down on the desert, someone groaned as they dragged themselves across the ground.

Not Dee.

Jack pushed the slide back and stepped out from behind the boulder with the empty Glock. The man stood ten feet downslope, pushing rounds into the open cylinder of his revolver, and when he looked up his eyes went wide like he'd been caught stealing or worse. Jack trained the Glock on him, a two-handed grip, but he couldn't stop his nerves from making it shake.

The man seemed roughly the same age as the blonde, who Jack could hear moaning behind the rock. He was sunburned and stinking. Lips chapped. Wore filthy hiking shorts and a pale blue, long-sleeved tee-shirt covered in rips and holes and dark sweat- and bloodstains.

"Drop it."

The revolver fell in the dirt.

"Move that way," Jack said, directing him up the hill away from the gun. "Now sit."

The man sat down against the boulder, squinting at the new sun.

"Naomi, you and Cole come here." He glanced over his shoulder as he said it, glimpsed a small figure moving toward them on the desert—Dee. In the morning silence, he could still hear that Jeep heading toward the mountains, the noise of its engine on a steady decline.

The man glared at Jack. "Let me help Heather."

Naomi came around the boulder, struggling to carry Cole who whimpered in his sister's arms.

"Go put him in the car, Na."

"Is Mom okay?"

"Yes."

"I want to see Heather."

Naomi looked at the man as she moved past. "Why? She's dead. Just like you're going to be."

The man called for her, and when Heather didn't answer, his face broke up and he buried it in the crook of his arm and wept.

Jack's left shoulder had established a pulse of its own. Lightheaded, he eased down onto a rock, keeping the Glock leveled on the man's chest.

"Look at me."

The man wouldn’t.

“Look at me or I’ll kill you right now.”

The man looked up, wiped his face, tears cutting streaks of red through the film of dirt and dust.

“What’s your name?”

“Dave.”

“Where you from, Dave?”

“Eden Prairie, Minnesota.”

“What do you do for a living?”

It took him a moment to answer, as if he were having to sift back through several lifetimes.

“I was a financial advisor for a credit union.”

“And this morning, out here in the desert, you were going to kill my children.”

“You don’t understand.”

“You’re fucking right I don’t understand, but if you explain it to me right now, you won’t die.”

“Can I see her first?”

“No.”

Dave stared for a split second at Jack—a look of seething hatred that vanished as fast as it had come.

“Heather and I came out several weeks ago with our friends on a backpacking trip near Sheridan. Up in the Big Horns. We camped at this place, Solitude Lake. Little knoll a couple hundred feet above the water. Our first night there, we had this crazy supper. Pasta, bread, cheese, several bottles of great wine. Smoked a few bowls before bed and crashed. The lights woke me in the middle of the night. I got Heather up, and we climbed out of our tent to see what was happening. Tried to wake Brad and Jen but they wouldn’t get up. We laid down in the grass, Heather and me, and just watched the sky.”

“What did you see?” Jack asked. “That turned you into this?”

The man’s eyes filled up. “You ever witnessed pure beauty?”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“I saw perfection for fifty-four minutes, and it changed my life.”

“What are you talking about?”

“God.”

“You saw God.”

“We all did.”

“In the lights.”

“He is the lights.”

“Why do you hate me?”

“Because you didn’t.”

“Were those your friends in the Jeep?” Jack asked, though he already knew the answer. As Dave shook his head, Jack felt a molten-liquid mass coalescing in the pit of his stomach. “You murdered them.”

Dave smiled, a strange and chilling postcard of glee, and he was suddenly on his feet and running, four steps covered before Jack had even thought to react.

The full load of double aught buckshot slammed into Dave’s chest and threw him back onto the ground. Dee stood holding the smoking shotgun, still trained on Dave who was trying to sit up and making loud, gasping croaks like a distressed bird. After a minute, he fell back in the dirt and went into silent shock as he bled out.

Jack struggled onto his feet and walked over to Dee.

“You’re really hurting,” she said.

He nodded as they started back down the slope toward the Rover and the F-150.

“I need to see your shoulder. Do you think the bullet’s still in there or—”

“It’s in there.”

They approached the vehicles.

Dee said, “Wish we could take the truck. At least it has windows.”

“We will take its gas.”

“You kept the hose from the Schirards’ house?”

“Yeah.”

In the backseat of the Rover, Naomi cradled her brother in her arms, rocking him and whispering in his ear.

“Get the gas cans out of the back.”

The F-150 was black and silver under the layers of dust. Jack pulled open the passenger door with his right arm and stepped up into the cab. It smelled of suntan lotion. Trash cluttered the floorboards—empty boxes of ammunition, empty milk jugs, hundreds of brass shell casings.

He tugged the keys out of the ignition.

Back outside, he unlocked the gas cap.

“How much is in there?” Dee asked.

“I didn’t look at the gauge.” He took the hose from her and worked it through the hole. “Where’s the can?”

“Right here.”

He could feel a cool trickle meandering down the inner thigh of his left leg, wondered how much blood that meant he’d lost.

“You okay, Jack?”

“Yeah, I just. . .a little lightheaded.”

“Let me help with that.”

“I’ve got it. Just unscrew the cap.”

“It is.”

“Oh.”

As Jack brought the hose to his lips, a voice from the truck disrupted the fog in his head.

“Eighty-five, come back.”

Jack found the walkie-talkie inside the glove compartment.

“Eighty-five and Eighty-four, we’ve got Sixty-eight through Seventy-one headed back your way to check on things. If you’re already en route, advise, over.”

Jack pressed talk. “We’re in route.”

Another voice cut in, strained with pain, barely a whisper. “This is Eighty-four. . .oh, God. . .send help. . .please.”

“I didn’t copy that, over?”

Jack dropped the radio and climbed out. “That was the driver of the Jeep. We’re leaving.”

“Without the gas?”

“There isn’t time.”

He staggered over to the Rover, pulled open the door, slid in behind the wheel.

“We need gas, Jack. We’re under a quarter of a—”

“They’re sending four vehicles. Gas won’t help us when we’re dead.”

She ran back to the Ford and grabbed the tubing and the empty cans, tossed everything into the back of the Rover, and slammed the hatch.

“I’m driving,” she said.

“Why?”

“You’re in no shape.”

She had a point, his left shoe filling up with blood. He crawled over into the front passenger seat and Dee climbed in and shut the door, cranked the engine.

“Na, get you and Cole buckled in—”

“Just fucking go,” Jack said.

They started back across the desert, and Jack leaned against the door and tried to focus on the passing landscape instead of the fire in his shoulder. The pain was becoming unmanageable and sickening. He must have let slip a moan because Naomi said, “Daddy?”

“I’m fine, honey.”

He closed his eyes. So dizzy. Gone for a while and then Dee’s voice pulled him back. He sat up. Microscopic dots pulsating everywhere like black stars.

“Binoculars,” she was saying. “Can you look down the highway?”

She’d set them in his lap, and he lifted the eyecups to his eyes. Took him a moment to bring the road into focus through the driver side window.

The glint of sun off the distant windshields was unmistakable.

“They’re coming,” he said. “Still a ways off. Couple miles, maybe.”

The awful jarring of the desert disappeared as Dee turned onto the highway.

“Don’t do your safe, gas-mileage conserving acceleration,” he said. “Floor it and get us the hell out of here.”

The motor sounded harsh and clattery as they sped north, and Jack kept fighting the impulse to lean over to see the fuel gauge since the concept of unnecessary movement ran a bolt of nausea through him.

“What’s the gas situation?” he finally asked.

“Little under a quarter.”

“How fast you going?”

“Eighty-five.”

Jack opened his eyes and stared through the windshield—empty desert to the west, jagged mountains to the east. Overcome with the thought, the truth, that they’d reached the end of their five days of running. They were going to use up the last of their gas on this highway in the middle of nowhere and then those four trucks would show up and that would be the

end of his family. His eyes filled up with tears and he turned away from Dee so she wouldn't see.

The smell of smoke roused Jack off the door.

"Where are we?"

"Pinedale."

The tiny western community had been cremated, the honky-tonk Main Street littered with burned-out trucks and debris from looted stores. Near the center of town, a line of corpses in cowboy hats sitting along the sidewalk like gargoyles, charred black and still smoking.

"Fuel light came on a minute ago," Dee said.

"That was bound to happen."

"How you holding up?"

"I'm holding."

"You need to keep pressure on your shoulder, Jack, or it's going to keep bleeding."

They broke out of the fading smoke and Dee accelerated. The morning sky burned blue overhead, oblivious to it all.

Jack straightened and glanced back between the seats—nothing to see through the plastic sheeting that hyperventilated over the back hatch.

"I don't like how we can't see the road behind us," he said. "Pull over."

Three miles out of Pinedale, Dee veered onto the shoulder and Jack stumbled out of the Rover. Heard the incoming engines before he'd even raised the binoculars to his face—a dive-bomber wail like they were being pushed to the limits of their performance capabilities.

He jumped back into the front seat, said, "Go," and Dee shifted into drive, hit forty before Jack had managed to shut his door.

"How far?"

"I didn't even look. Where'd you put the shotgun?"

"Backseat floorboard."

"Hand it to Daddy, Na."

Jack took the Mossberg from his daughter, had to yell over the straining engine. "How many times did you shoot it, Dee?"

"I don't know. Four or five. I wasn't keeping count."

Jack flipped open the center console, grabbed a few shells, started feeding them in, the pain brilliant with every twitch of the deltoid in his left

shoulder.

“Na, climb into the way back and peek through those holes. See if you can spot whatever’s coming.”

He reached under his seat, grabbed the roadmap. Opened it across his lap to the Wyoming page and traced their route north out of Rock Springs through Pinedale.

“There’s a turnoff coming up, Dee. Highway 352. Take it.”

“Where’s it go?”

“Into the Wind Rivers. Dead-ends after twenty miles or so.”

“Oh my God, I see the trucks.”

“How far, Na?”

“I don’t know. They’re small, but I can see them. Getting closer for sure.”

“Why would we take a dead-end road, Jack?”

“Because they can see us and run us down on these long, open stretches. Go faster.”

“We’re doing ninety.”

“Well, do a hundred. If they catch us before the turnoff, it’s over.”

“I think I see it.”

They screamed toward a road sign.

“You’re about to miss it,” Jack said.

She stepped on the brake and made the turn at thirty-five, swinging wide into the oncoming lane, the Rover briefly on two wheels.

“Nice,” Jack said.

Through the fist-size hole in his plastic window, he stared back down the highway, saw four vehicles streaking toward them. Inside of half a mile, he would’ve guessed.

“You see them?” Dee asked.

“Yeah. Get us up in those mountains as fast as you can.”

The highway shot through the last bit of desert before the mountains, and Jack could smell the heat of the engine and the sagebrush screaming by.

At a hundred miles per hour, they ripped through a ghost town—three buildings, two of them listing, a derelict post office.

The foothills lifted out of the desert less than a mile away, and already they were climbing.

“How’s the fuel gauge, Dee?”

“We’re on the empty slash.”

The road cut a gentle turn away from the foothills and passed through a grove of cottonwoods. They sped alongside a river and into a canyon, the colder, pine-sweetened air streaming through the plastic windows.

Jack said, “Start looking for a place to pull over.”

“Trees are too tight here.”

“Na, would you climb into the back again? When we make our move, we need to be certain they can’t see us.”

The sun blinked through the trees in shards of blinding light.

Jack leaned against the door again, felt Dee take hold of his hand.

“Talk to me, Jack.”

“I don’t feel like talking.”

“Because of the pain?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t see them yet,” Naomi yelled.

“Cole all right?” he asked.

“Sleeping if you can believe it.”

Into a meadow, the frosted grasses sparkling under the sun, the road straight for a quarter mile.

As they reentered the woods on the other side, Naomi said, “They’re just now coming into the meadow.”

“How many, sweetie?”

“Four.”

“You feel that, Jack?”

“What?”

“Engine just sputtered.”

He struggled to sit up.

Leaned back over.

Vomited into the floorboard.

“Jack, is there blood in it?”

“I don’t know.”

He sat up, focused on the passing trees instead of the acid burn in the back of his throat.

When they rounded the next hairpin curve, Jack saw a corridor through the pines—not a road or a path, just a little space between the trees.

“There, Dee. See it?”

“Where?”

“There. Slow down. Just left of that boulder. Drive off the road right there.”

Dee steered into the trees.

The violent jarring launched Jack into the dashboard, something struck the undercarriage, and by the time he was back in his seat, nose pouring blood, Dee had pulled the Rover into a shady spot between several giant ponderosa pines.

She killed the engine and Jack opened his door and stumbled out.

Easy to see the path they’d blazed through the forest—saplings severed, pale tire tracks in the trampled grass.

A couple hundred yards through the trees, four trucks raced by, and Jack stood listening to the roar of their engines, which after ten seconds, quieted down to a distant idling that went on and on, Jack listening, inadvertently holding his breath while his shoulder throbbed like a second heartbeat.

Dee walked over.

“They’re wondering if we’ve gotten ahead of them, or pulled a fast one,” he said. “If they’re smart, they’ll send two trucks up the canyon and two trucks back to the meadow to wait.”

“But they don’t know we’re out of gas,” Dee said. “If they think we doubled back, maybe they’ll keep going all the way to the highway.”

The engines went silent.

Naomi called out to Jack.

He spun around. “Shhh.”

“You think they’ve moved on?” Dee whispered.

“No. They’re listening for the sound of our engine. Go get the guns.”

They walked as far back into the woods as Jack could manage—barely fifty yards—and lay down in a bed of pine needles.

“Dee,” Jack whispered.

“What?”

“You’ve got to listen for what’s coming, okay? I have to rest now.”

“That’s fine.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Just close your eyes.”

Jack turned over onto his right side, and he tried to listen for approaching footsteps but kept passing in and out of consciousness as the sun moved over the pines and made a play of light and shadow on his face.

The next time he woke the sun was straight overhead and he could hear Dee telling Cole a story. He sat up. His head swirled. Looked down at the pine needles, some of which had become glued together with blood. He felt feverish and cold, and soon Dee was there, easing him back onto the forest floor.

He opened his eyes, tried to sit up, thought better of it. Dee sat beside him and the sun was gone. Through the pines, the pieces of sky held the rich blue of late afternoon.

"Hi there," she said.

"What time is it?"

"Four-fifteen. You've been sleeping all day."

"Where are the kids?"

"Playing by a stream."

"Nobody came?"

"Nobody came. You're thirsty, I bet." She unscrewed the cap from a milk jug and held it to his mouth. The coldness of the water stung his throat, ignited a fierce and sudden thirst. When he finished drinking, he looked up at his wife.

"How am I doing, Doc?"

Shook her head. "I stopped the bleeding, but you're not so hot, Mr. Colclough." She reached into the first aid kit, cracked open a bottle of Tylenol. "Here. Open." Dumped a handful of pills onto Jack's tongue, helped him wash them down. "I have to get that bullet out, and I need to do it before we run out of daylight."

"Fuck."

"Jack, there's worse people you could be stuck with in this situation."

"Than Wifey, MD?"

"That's right."

"You're a GP. When's the last time you even held a scalpel? Med school? I mean, do you even have the tools to—"

"Really, Jack? You want me to tell you the gory details of what I'm about to do, or you want to turn your head away and let me do my thing?"

"You can do this?"

She squeezed his hand. “I can. And I have to or you’ll get an infection and die.”

Jack lay flat on his back, his head turned away from his left shoulder, wishing for unconsciousness.

“Jack, I need you to be as still as you possibly can.”

Dee cut away his shirt.

“Using my Swiss Army knife?”

“Yep.”

“You’re going to sterilize it?”

“I’m afraid your health insurance plan doesn’t cover sterilizations.”

“That’s hilarious. Seriously—”

“It’s already done.”

“What with?”

“A match and an iodine pad. I’m going to wipe down your shoulder now.”

Felt like ice on a flaming wound as she cleaned the dried blood and gunpowder from the entry hole.

“How’s it look?” he asked.

“Like somebody shot you.”

“Can you tell how far in it went?”

“Please let me focus.”

Something moved inside his shoulder. There was pain, but nothing like he’d feared.

Dee said, “Shit.”

“First-rate bedside manner. What’s wrong?”

“I thought maybe I could do this easily. Just pull the bullet out with these plastic tweezers.”

“That sounds like a super plan. Why can’t you do it?”

“I can’t get at it yet.”

“Fuck, you’re going to cut me.” Jack heard the snap of a blade locking into place. “Big blade? Small blade?”

“Think about something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like what we’re going to have for dinner.”

And he did think about it. For four seconds. Pictured the jar of pickled beets in the Rover and it made him want to cry. All of it—lying here in the woods in extraordinary pain without food and the day leaving them and nowhere to go and no way to get there— and then the knife entered his shoulder in a revelation of searing pain.

"Holy motherfuck—"

"Hold still."

She was really going after it, and Jack made a crushing fist, fighting back a surge of nausea as he tried to ask if she saw the bullet yet, if she could get at it now, desperate for some indication that this would be ending soon please God, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and he descended into a merciful darkness.

When he came to, Dee was crouched over him, headlamp blazing and Cole and Naomi beside her looking on. She was lifting a piece of string attached to a needle and smiling. She looked exhausted.

"You passed out you big baby."

He said, "Thank God for that. Please tell me you got it."

Naomi held up a squashed mushroom of lead between her fingers.

"I'm going to make you a necklace so you can wear it."

"You must have read my mind, sweetie."

He groaned as Dee ran the needle through his shoulder again and tightened the knot.

"I know it hurts, but I have to finish." She started another stitch. "I really had to cut you to get it out. You lost two, maybe three pints of blood, which is right on the verge of not being okay."

He woke often during the night, freezing even inside his sleeping bag. The stars shone through the pines, and he was caught up in a fever dream—crawling toward a stream and dying of thirst, but every time he reached the water and cupped a handful to his mouth, it turned to ash and the wind took it.

Once, he woke and it was Naomi's voice that came to him in the dark.

"It's okay, Daddy. You're just having a bad dream."

And she brought the jug of water to his lips and helped him drink and she was still there, her hand against his burning forehead, when he sank back down into sleep.

HE registered the sun on his eyelids. Pulled the sleeping bag over his head, let his right hand graze his left arm.

The sickening heat had gone out of it.

Cole's laughter erupted some distance away in the forest.

Jack opened his eyes and pushed away the sleeping bag and slowly sat up.

Midday light.

The smell of sun-warmed pine needles everywhere.

Wind rushing through the tops of the trees.

Dee inspected his left shoulder. "Looking good."

"What about all that blood I lost?"

"Your body's making it back, but you need to be drinking constantly. More water than we have. And you need food. Particularly iron so you can remake those red blood cells."

"How are the kids?"

"Hungry. Na's been amazing with Cole, but I'm not sure how much longer she can keep it up."

"How are you?"

She looked back at the Rover. "Think it'll start?"

"Even if it does, we might have a gallon of gas left. Maybe a cup. No way to know."

"We can't just sit here and wait."

"We could head back toward the highway, or keep going up the canyon. See how far we get."

"Jack, we're not going to find anything, and you know it."

"That's a real possibility."

"We need more gas."

"We need a new car."

"If we don't find something, Jack, if we're still in these mountains tonight and we have no way to travel anywhere except on foot, which you

don’t have the strength for, it’s going to get very bad very fast.”

“You want to pray?”

“Pray?”

“Yeah, pray.”

“That’s really pathetic, Jack.”

The engine cranked on the first attempt, though when Dee shifted into reverse an awful racket jangled to life under the hood. She backed them out of the grove and took it slow through the trees toward the road.

“Which way, Jack?”

“Up the canyon.”

“You sure?”

“Well, we know what’s back toward the highway—nothing.”

She turned onto the road and eased through a gentle acceleration. They’d torn the plastic windows out and the noise of the engine precluded any communication softer than shouting. Jack glanced into the backseat, saw Naomi and Cole sharing the jar of beets. Winked at his son, thinking he looked thinner in the face, his cheekbones more pronounced.

“We’re completely below the empty slash,” Dee said.

They did forty up the road, Jack constantly looking back through the glassless hatch for anything in pursuit.

After four miles, the pavement went to gravel.

They came out of the canyon.

The road had been cut into a mountainside and the pines exchanged for hardier, more alpine-looking evergreens and aspen in full color. At 2:48 p.m., the engine sputtered, and at 2:49, on a level stretch of road on the side of a mountain, died.

They rolled to a stop and Jack looked over at Dee and back at his children.

“That’s all, folks.”

“We’re out of gas?” Cole asked.

“Bone dry.”

Dee set the parking brake.

Jack opened his door, stepped down onto the road. “Come on.”

“Jack.” Dee climbed out and slammed her door. “What are you doing?”

He adjusted the sling which Dee had fashioned out of a spare tee-shirt for his left arm, said, “I’m going to walk up this road until I find something to help us or until I can’t walk anymore. You coming?”

“There’s not going to be anything up this road, Jack. We’re in the middle of a fucking wilderness.”

“Should we just lay down in the road right here then? Wait to die? Or maybe I should get the Glock and put us all—”

“Don’t you ever—”

“Hey, guys?” Naomi got out and walked around to the front of the Rover and stood between her parents. “Look.”

She pointed toward the side of the mountain, perhaps fifty feet up from where they’d stopped, at an overgrown, one-lane road that climbed into the trees.

Jack said, “It’s probably just some old wagon trail. There used to be mining around here I think.”

“You don’t see it.”

“See what?”

“There’s a mailbox.”

The mailbox was black and unmarked, and the Colcloughs walked past it up the narrow road into the trees. Jack was winded before the first hairpin turn, but keeping far enough ahead of Dee and the kids that he could gasp for air in private.

At four-thirty in the afternoon, he stopped at an overlook—dizzy, heartbeat rattling his entire body, pounding through his left shoulder. He collapsed breathless on the rock, still sucking down gulps of air when the rest of his family arrived.

“This is too much for you,” Dee said, out of breath herself.

They could see a slice of the road several hundred feet below where it briefly emerged from the forest. A square-topped dome of a mountain loomed ten miles away, the summit dusted with snow. Even bigger peaks beyond.

Jack struggled to his feet and went on.

The road wound through an aspen grove that was peaking—pale yellows and deep yellows and the occasional orange—and when the wind blew

through the trees, the leaves fluttered like weightless coins.

The sun was falling through the western sky. Already a cool edge to the air in advance of another clear and freezing night. They hadn't brought their sleeping bags from the car. Hadn't brought water. Nothing but the shotgun and the Glock and it occurred to Jack that they might very well be sleeping under the stars on the side of this mountain tonight.

Several switchbacks later, the road curved and Jack walked out of the aspen into a meadow.

He stopped.

Took the Glock out of his waistband and tugged back the slide.

Dee gasped.

Cole said, "What, Mama?"

Jack turned around and shushed them and led them back into the woods.

"Is anyone there?" Dee whispered.

"I couldn't tell. Let me go check things out."

"I should go, Jack. You're too weak."

"Don't move from this spot, any of you, until I come back."

He jogged into the meadow. You could see the desert in the west, the sun bleeding out across it and the distant gray thread of Highway 191. It was getting cold. He slowed to a walk, his shoulder pulsing again. The wind had died away and the trees stood motionless. Somewhere, the murmur of a stream.

A covered porch ran the length of it, loaded with firewood. Solar panels clung to the steep pitch of the roof. Dormers on the second floor. A chimney rising up through the center. The windows were dark, reflecting the sunset off the glass so he couldn't see inside, even as he walked up the steps.

The wooden porch bowed and creaked under his weight. He leaned in toward a window, touched his nose to the glass, framed his face in his hands to block the natural light.

Darkness inside. The shape of furniture. High ceilings. No movement.

He tried the front door. Locked. Turned away, shielded his eyes, and swung the Glock through the window.

Dee shouted something from the woods.

“I’m okay,” he yelled. “Just breaking in.”

He straddled the windowframe and stepped down into the cabin. Through the skylight above the entrance, a column of late sun slanted through the glass and struck the stone of the freestanding fireplace with a medallion of orange light. It didn’t smell like anyone had been here in some time. The mustiness of infrequent habitation.

From what he could see in the fading light, the floorplan was spacious and open. A staircase corkscrewed up to the second level where the banistered hallway and three open doors were visible from Jack’s vantage.

He moved across the hardwood floor toward the kitchen.

A deep sink and granite countertops lined the back wall of windows which looked out over the deck into the brilliant aspen.

He walked over to the pantry, pulled open the door.

Jack led Dee and the kids up the front porch steps and into the cabin.

“There’s food here, Jack?”

“Just come on.”

The last trickle of daylight was just sufficient to illuminate the kitchen, where Jack had thrown open every cabinet so they could see the treasure he’d found.

Dee sat down and put her head between her knees and wept.

They spread out on the floor as the world went black out the kitchen windows, each with their own cold can and sharing a big bag of sourdough pretzels torn open and spilled across the floor beside a sixer of warm Sierra Mist.

“Oh my God, this is the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” Naomi said, halfway through her clam chowder. Grunts of agreement all around—Jack had gone for the chili, Dee the beef vegetable soup, Cole the Chef Boyardee cheese ravioli.

A half hour later, Naomi slept on a leather couch near the fireplace while Jack covered her with two quilts he’d found in a game closet. He went up the spiral staircase, holding one of the kerosene lamps they’d taken from the coffee table downstairs, Dee in tow, carrying Cole. Into the first bedroom.

Jack pulled back the quilt, blanket, sheet, and Dee laid their son on the mattress and kissed his forehead and covered him back up.

“It’ll get cold in here tonight,” she said.

“Not as cold as last night.”

“If he wakes up and no one’s here, he’s going to be scared.”

“You think so? After these last few days? He’s done in, Dee. He won’t wake for hours.”

They lay in bed downstairs in the dark under a pile of blankets. Somewhere, the tick of a second hand. Naomi’s deep respirations in the living room. No other sound.

“Do you think we’re safe here?” Dee whispered.

“Safer than starving and freezing to death on the side of a mountain.”

“But long-term, I mean.”

“I don’t know yet. I can’t think about it right now. I have nothing left.”

Dee snuggled up to him and stretched a leg across his, her skin cool and like fine-grit sandpaper. She ran her fingers through the hair on his chest. First time in months she’d put her hands on him, and it felt, in the best kind of way, like a stranger touching him.

“Nothing, Jack?” And she slipped her hand inside the waistband of his boxer shorts. “’Cause this doesn’t feel like nothing.”

“Our daughter is twenty feet away,” he whispered.

Dee climbed out of bed and crept across the floor and closed them in behind the French doors and their panes of opaque glass. He heard the lock push in. She pushed the straps off her shoulders and her undershirt puddled around her feet. Slid her panties down her legs, and Jack watched her come back to him, naked and pale, wishing for some moonlight for her to move through as she crawled across the bed.

“I’m nasty,” he said. “Haven’t had a shower in—”

“I’m nasty, too.”

She stripped him and sat him up against the headboard and eased down onto his lap, and already the pain in his shoulder was subsiding. He could tell this was going to be one of the great fucks of his life.

IN the morning, Jack hiked down to the road with a gallon of the gasoline he'd found in the shed. There was plenty more where it came from—six five-gallon containers that he figured were meant for the backup generator in case the solar power system failed. The Rover managed to crank, and he put it into four-wheel high.

A hundred yards up the mountain, he stopped and grabbed the chainsaw out of the backseat and came out of his sling. Took him thirty minutes just to hack through the dense lower branches so he could get at the base, going slow so he didn't rip the stitches in his shoulder. Another twenty to carve a wedge into the trunk, and when the spruce finally fell across the road, it perfumed the air with sap and splintered wood.

Naomi and Cole were still sleeping when Jack returned to find Dee in the kitchen, having already done what he suggested—pull down all the food from the cabinets and the pantry to see what they had to work with.

"Doesn't look like much," he said by way of greeting.

Dee looked up from where she sat on the kitchen floor, surrounded by cans and glass jars and packages. "How'd the car do?"

"Rough as hell, but I got it to the shed. Maybe I'll play mechanic in a few days, see if I can fix what's wrong."

They spent the morning dividing out the food and trying to see what they might make from the staples like flour and sugar, assuming Jack could fire up the solar power system and get the stove working. In the end, rationing as frugally as they could stomach, they calculated enough meals to feed their family for thirteen days.

"That's not good enough," Dee said. "And we're going to be hungry all the time before we actually begin to starve to death."

"It's more food than we had yesterday. I saw some fly-fishing gear in the shed, and there's a stream out back."

"You took one class, Jack. Two years ago. None of your flies at home ever touched water, and you think you're going to go out there and catch enough fish for us—"

"How about sending some positive energy into this situation, dear-heart?"

She flashed a fake smile, batted her eyes. "I'm sure you'll catch more than we can eat, Jack. I know you can do it."

“You’re such a bitch.” He said it with love.

He assembled a six-weight fly rod in the shed, stocked his vest with an assortment of flies, and carried a small cooler into the woods toward the sound of moving water. Found it fifty yards in—a wide, slow stream that flowed through the aspen. He sat down on the grassy bank. The sun as high as it would be all day. Light coming down through the trees in clear, bright splashes. The sky cloudless. Almost purple.

He filled the cooler in the stream. Got the tippet tied on and chose a fly at random. Took him five attempts to cinch the knot, then walked downslope until he came to a shaded pool several feet deep and out of the ruckus of the main current.

His first cast overshot the stream and the fly snagged on a spruce sapling. He waded across, the water knee-deep and freezing, and clambered out onto the warm grass on the opposite bank.

An hour later, he felt his first tap.

Midafternoon, he hooked a fingerling, Jack tugging the green line and backing away from the stream. It flopped in the grass, and he carefully lifted the fish which torqued violently and then went still, gills pulsing in his hand. Silver. Spotted with brown dots. He unhooked the fly and walked back to the cooler and dipped the trout into the water, thinking, God, was it small. Two or three bites at most if he didn’t completely destroy the thing when he tried to clean it.

They dined at the kitchen table as the light ran out—two cans of cold navy beans split between the four of them, three pretzels apiece, water from one of the plastic jugs Dee had brought in from the Rover.

“How many fish did you catch?” Cole asked.

“One,” Jack said.

“How big?”

Jack held his pointer fingers five inches apart.

“Oh.”

“It’s still in the cooler by the stream. But I saw some big ones.”

“Can I come fishing with you tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

Middle of the night, Jack sat up in bed.

“What’s wrong?” Dee asked, still half-asleep.

“I should’ve cut down the mailbox.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The mailbox by the road. The one Naomi saw that led us here.”

“Do it first thing in the morning.”

“No, I’m going now. I won’t be able to sleep.”

He hiked down with the chainsaw in the dark, reached the road at four in the morning. Cold. Below freezing he would’ve guessed. That distant, square-topped mountain shining silver under the moon. He walked out into the road and stood listening for a while.

The chainsaw motor seemed inappropriate at this hour. Like screams in a church. He decapitated the mailbox and carried it across the road and threw it down the mountainside.

Walking back up to the cabin, he rounded a hairpin curve and froze. Heart accelerating at what loomed just twenty feet up the road. It raised its enormous head, the giant rack pale and sharp in the predawn. He’d almost brought the shotgun, decided against it fearing his left arm couldn’t bear the weight. And so he watched the seven-hundred-pound elk walk off the road and vanish into the trees, wondering how long it might have fed his family.

BY midmorning, he had the off-grid power system up and running, water pumping in through the tap from the underground cisterns, and the water heater beginning to warm. They filled five plastic grocery bags under the faucet and tied them off and stowed them in the chest freezer. Tried not to acknowledge the fact that they were all skipping lunch.

Jack left Dee and Naomi to scour The Joy of Cooking for efficient bread recipes that jived with their ingredient list, and took his son with him into the woods.

He’d anticipated Cole wanting to fish, and since there wasn’t any spinning tackle to be had in the shed, surprised the boy with a provisional pole he’d fashioned that morning—an aspen sapling skinned of bark and

fitted with an eight-foot length of nylon string and a ceiling screw hook with which Cole might only inflict minimal damage.

The knot tying went faster and the casting smoother, Jack sticking the fly in the vicinity of his intent almost every time.

He'd caught two fingerlings by three o'clock and his first grown-up fish by four—a twelve-inch Rainbow on a dry fly that had been loitering in a pool beside a cascade. Cole screamed with delight as Jack brought the fish ashore, both of them squatting in that pure fall light to inspect the reddish band and the black spots and the micaceous skin that faded into white at the edges.

"It's really something, isn't it?" Jack said.

"You did good, Dad."

Jack set his rod in the grass and worked the hook out and carried the trout back across the stream toward the cooler in two hands and with as much care as he'd handled Naomi and Cole as squirming newborns.

They fished until the light went bad, Jack torn between the stream and his son who'd abandoned the aspen rod to construct a pile of polished, streambed stones on the opposite shore. Jack trying to ignore that thing that had been gnawing at him now for two days, that he wouldn't ever be ready to look in the eye. How could a father? But he saw it—from a distance, an oblique glance—and for right now at least, that was as close as his heart could stand to be.

When they returned, the sun had just slipped below the desert and Dee and Naomi were hanging blankets over the windows and the cabin smelled of sweet, baking bread.

The women had carried in several armloads of firewood from the porch and stacked it around the hearth, and while Cole regaled everyone with the story of catching the fish, Jack built a base of kindling using a dozen of the pinecones stored in a wicker basket and an issue of USA Today.

The front-page headlines stopped him as he ripped out a sheet—six-month-old bits of news about the war, political infighting, Wall Street, the death of a young celebrity.

"What's with the blankets over the windows?" he asked as he balled up the sports page and hoisted the first log onto the pyre.

"So our fire won't be visible."

Two more logs and then he struck a match, held it to the newsprint.

Jack lay in bed watching fireshadows move across the walls of the living room. Warm under the blanket. Hungry but content.

“We can’t have fires like this anymore,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“When we don’t need them. The winter here is going to be awful. We should save the firewood for blizzards. Nights when it goes below zero. I’m going to have to cut a hell of a lot more wood.”

“So you want to stay?”

“If we can get the food situation under control.”

“I don’t know, Jack.”

“What? You’d rather go back out into what we just escaped?”

“No, but we’ll starve to death here.”

“Not with a seasoned outdoorsman like me taking care of things.”

A tremor of laughter moved through her.

“You noticed any changes in Cole?” he asked.

“No. Why? What makes you ask that?”

“That man in the desert—the one you shot when he came after me? He and his wife had been camping with another couple. They saw the lights. The other couple slept through them. Afterward, they murdered their friends.”

“What does this have to do with my son?”

“You, me, and Naomi, we slept through the aurora. Cole spent the night at Alex’s. Their family went out to the baseball field with the neighborhood and watched. Remember him telling us about it the next day?”

Dee was quiet for a long time.

Jack could see the embers in the fireplace and he could hear his daughter breathing.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Jack, what that man told you. He’s our son, for chrissake. You think he wants to hurt us?”

“I don’t know, but this is something we should be aware of. Today, I caught him staring at himself in the mirror. For a long time. It was weird. I don’t know what that was about, but—”

“We don’t know that any of what’s happening is connected to the lights. It’s total speculation.”

“I agree, but what if Cole changes? What if he becomes violent?”

“Jack, I’m just telling you, if it turns out. . .I want you to shoot me.”

“Dee—”

“I’m not kidding, not exaggerating, just telling you that I do not have it in me to handle that.”

“You have a daughter, too. You don’t have the luxury not to handle shit.”

“‘Should we kill our son if he becomes a threat?’ Is that the question you’re dancing around?”

“We have to talk about it, Dee. I don’t want it to happen and us have no idea what to do.”

“I think I already answered your question.”

“What?”

“I would rather die.”

“Me, too,” Jack said.

“So what are we saying?”

“We’re saying. . .we’re saying he’s our boy, and we stay together, no matter what.”

AT dawn, Jack crept out of bed and dressed in the dark, grabbed the shotgun leaning against the bedside table and took it with him out into the living room.

He unlocked the front door and stepped outside.

Freezing. A heavy frost on the grass.

The desert purple. Still black along the western fringe.

He walked across the meadow into the trees and sat down against the base of an aspen. Everything still. Everything he loved in that dark house across the way.

His breath steamed and he thought about his father and he thought about Reid, his best friend in the humanities department, and the pints they’d put down Thursday nights at Two Fools Tavern. The remembrance touched something so raw he disavowed it all, on the spot. Focused instead on the coming hours, and all the things he had to do, and the order in which he might do them. Nothing before this cabin mattered anymore, only the given day, and with this thought he cleared his mind and scanned the trees that rimmed the meadow, praying for an elk to emerge.

He took the chainsaw and felled aspen trees until lunch. His stitches held, so he fished the rest of the day, taking three cutthroats and a brook trout out of a section of the stream a quarter mile upslope that boasted an abundance of deep pools. The water clear where it passed over rock and green where the sun hit it. Black in the shadows.

In the late afternoon, Jack stood across the stream from Cole watching the boy float aspen leaves into a cascade. He reeled in and set his rod down and waded across. Climbed up onto the bank and sat down dripping in the leaves beside his son.

"How you doing, buddy?"

"Good."

Cole pushed another leaf into the water and they watched the current take it.

"You like being here?" Jack asked.

"Yes."

"I do, too."

"These are my little boats, and they're crashing in the waterfall."

"Can I sail one?"

Cole offered a leaf, and Jack sent another golden ship to its death.

"Cole, remember the aurora you watched with Alex?"

"Yes."

"I want to ask you something about it."

"What?"

"Did you feel different after you saw it?"

"A little bit."

"Like how?"

"I don't know."

"Did you have strange thoughts toward your mom and your sister and me?"

The boy shrugged.

"You could tell me, you know. I want you to know that. You can always tell me anything. No matter what it is. No matter how bad you think it is."

"I just wish you had seen the lights, too," Cole said.

"Why is that?"

"They were real pretty. More than anything I ever saw."

They drained the cooler as the sun dropped and carried it back to the cabin, fish flopping inside against the plastic.

Jack and Dee sat in rocking chairs on the front porch drinking ice cold bottles of Miller High Life from a case that had been left behind. They were watching great spirals of smoke swirl up into the sky sixty miles northwest near the base of Grand Teton.

“What’s burning out there?” Dee said.

“I think that’s Jackson.”

They ate dinner and put the kids to bed. When they came back out onto the porch, the sun had finally crashed, leaving the flames of that distant, burning city to stand out in the darkness like an abandoned campfire.

Jack cracked open a new pair of beers, handed one to Dee.

Tired and strangely satisfied with the soreness in his body.

He’d been rehearsing how he would say it all day, the last two days even. Figured he might as well get on with it, though the phrasing had completely escaped him.

“Does it feel to you,” Jack said, “like we’re starting a new life?”

“Little bit. How many days have we been here?”

He had to think about it. “Three.”

“Feels longer. A lot longer.”

“Yeah.”

He could feel the good beer buzz beginning to swarm in his head. Didn’t know if it was the altitude or malnourishment, but he couldn’t think of the last time two beers had gotten him this close to drunk.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

“What?” she laughed, “you’re seeing someone?”

None of the permutations of this conversation, as he’d imagined it, had involved Dee asking that question. His head cleared so fast it left him with a subtle throbbing at the base of his skull—a premonition of the hangover to come.

“Two years ago.”

Dee’s face emptied of the lightness of the moment and her bottle hit the porch and the beer fizzed out and drained through a crack between the two-by-sixes. The air suddenly reeked of yeast and alcohol.

“Lasted a month,” he said. “Only time I ever. . .I ended it because I couldn’t stand—”

“One of your fucking TAs?”

“We met in—”

“No, no, no, I don’t want to hear a single detail of any of it and I don’t ever want to know her name. Nothing about her. Just why you’re telling me this now. In this moment. I could’ve died never knowing and you took that from me.”

“When we left Albuquerque, our marriage was on life support. I mean, three nights ago was the first time we’d been together in. . .I don’t even know—”

“Seven months.”

“Dee, I know I’ve been checked out on our family, and for a long time. Because of guilt, depression, I don’t know. These last nine days have been the worst, hardest of our life, but in some ways, the best, too. And now, it feels to me like we’re starting something new here, so I don’t want to start it with any lies. Nothing between us.”

“Well, there is now. And. . . . . .why the fuck would you tell me this?”

She shrieked it, her voice bouncing back from the invisible wall of trees.

“At least I was always honest with you about Kiernan,” Dee said.

“Yeah, that was such a comfort as our marriage imploded.”

Dee jumped up from the rocking chair and walked off the porch and vanished into the meadow.

Jack slammed the rest of his beer, threw it in the grass.

Sat watching the horizon burn to the soundtrack of his wife crying out there in the dark.

5:15 a.m. and Jack rose up slowly, shouldered the shotgun. He took aim on the neck of the same giant bull he’d seen two mornings ago on the hike up from the road. The recoil drove a splinter of pain through his left shoulder, a thundering blast across the clearing.

The elk’s head dipped. It staggered.

Jack on his feet, bolting through the frosted grass as he pumped the Mossberg and fired again.

When he reached it, the animal lay on its side, eyes open, breathing fast and raggedly. Jack knelt beside it and held one of the spurs on the enormous rack while the blood rushed out across the ground.

He hadn't field-dressed an animal in over twenty years, since the last time he'd hunted with his father in Montana when he was in college. But the anatomy and the method slowly returned to him.

Naomi and Cole looked on in semi-horror as he tied off the hoofs, heaved the animal onto its back, and with the bowie knife he'd been given in Silverton, Colorado, slit the elk from anus to throat.

He worked hard, tried to work fast. As the first rays of sunlight streamed through the aspen onto the meadow, he severed the muscle tissue that held the entrails and let the steaming gutpile roll out of the carcass into the grass. He excavated the colon and the bladder, liver and heart, and sent Cole back to the cabin in search of several blankets.

He was three hours skinning the elk, two more separating the shoulder from the ribcage. All afternoon removing the backstrap, boning out the meat from between the ribs, peeling off the tenderloins from underneath. Everything laid out to drain and cool on a large blanket. He cut the hindquarters from the pelvic bone as the sun slid down over the desert, trying not to slice the meat itself but still doing a fair amount of damage.

Naomi brought him a can of tomato soup for supper, which he drank down in less than a minute. When he asked about her mother, she told him Dee was sleeping. Had been all day.

In the cold still dusk, thirteen hours after the kill, Jack carried, in five trips, what he estimated to be two hundred pounds of meat to the front porch of the cabin.

The bags of water had frozen solid in the chest freezer, and Jack stowed the meat inside, still wrapped in blankets. He was sunburned and weak and covered in blood, the elk's and his—several stitches had ripped and the wound in his shoulder had opened again.

He took his first shower since arriving at the cabin. Twenty minutes under near-scalding water scrubbing the blood out of his hair and skin and watching the filth swirl down the drain under his feet. Crawled into a double bed on an aspen frame a little before 10:00 p.m. in the second

bedroom upstairs. Cole snoring softly next door. Through the window he could hear the sound of the stream in the woods.

A footstep snapped him awake. He opened his eyes to the silhouette of Dee standing in the doorway. She came over and climbed into bed, their faces inches apart in the dark.

"I hear we have an elk," she whispered.

"In the freezer. As we speak."

"You're your kids' superhero, I hope you know. I've never heard Naomi talk about you like she did today."

"I'm going to miss being a constant source of embarrassment."

She put her hand on his face. "You don't stink," she said.

"Showers will do that."

"Why are you up here and not in my bed?"

"Figured you still needed some space."

She kissed him. "Come with me, Jack."

SNOW, just a dusting, lay upon the meadow the following morning but it was gone before lunch. Dee replaced the stitches in Jack's shoulder and he spent an hour butchering steaks out of the tenderloins. Made a dry rub from the available spices in the kitchen and worked it into the meat.

He found a wiffle ball set in the shed. They used empty milkjugs for bases and weeded a pitcher's mound and held a series, boys versus girls, that concluded in game seven when Cole knocked a line drive over third base and brought Jack home.

The afternoon, Jack spent sitting on the porch drinking beer and watching Dee and the kids play out on the meadow. He wouldn't allow himself to think back or forward, but only to register the moment—the wind moving through gold aspen leaves, his skin warm in the sun, the sound of Cole's laughter, the shape of Dee when, every so often, she would turn and look back toward the porch and wave to him. Her shoulders were brown and the details of her face obscured by distance and the shadow of a visor, though he could still pick out the white brushstroke of her smile.

As another day set sail, he grilled the elk steaks and a rainbow and surprised everyone with a bottle of 1994 Silver Oak he'd found hidden

away in a cabinet over the sink. They gathered at the kitchen table and ate by candlelight, even Cole getting his own small pour of wine in a shotglass. Toward the end of supper, Jack stood and raised his glass and toasted his son, his daughter, his wife, each individually, and then said to everyone, his voice only breaking once, that of all his days, this had been the finest of his life.

ANOTHER fall day in the mountains, Jack fishing alone with his thoughts and the sound of moving water that never seemed to leave him now, even in dreams. Imagining what winter might be like in this place. An entire season spent indoors.

He caught two brookies before lunch and stowed them away in the cooler. The exhaustion from two days ago still lingered. He found a bed of moss downstream and took off his disintegrating trail shoes and eased back onto the natural carpet. There weren't as many leaves on the aspen as there had been just a week ago when they'd arrived, the woods brighter for it. He could feel the moisture from the moss seeping through his shirt—cool and pleasant—and the sunlight in his face a perfect offset. He slept.

Walked home in the early evening, the inside of the cooler noisy with the throes of four suffocating fish.

Called out, "I'm home," as he climbed onto the porch.

Set the cooler down, kicked off his shoes.

Inside, Dee and the kids played Monopoly on the living room floor.

"Who's winning?" he asked.

"Cole," Dee said. "Na and I are broke. He's bought every property he's landed on. Owns Community Chest and Chance. I just sold him Free Parking."

"Can you even do that?"

"I think he's paying us not to quit at this point. It's all very ridiculous."

He bent down, kissed his wife.

"You smell fishy," she said. "How'd you do?"

"Four."

"Big ones?"

"Decent size."

“We can eat whenever you’re ready.”

Jack showered and dressed in a plaid button-up and blue jeans that were perhaps a size too small and still smelled strongly of their prior owner. Tinged with the remnant of sweet smoke, cigar or pipe. Something crinkled in the back pocket as Jack walked from the bedroom to the kitchen, and he dug out a receipt for a box of tippet from the Great Outdoor Shop in Pinedale, purchased four months ago with a credit card by Douglas W. Holt.

A three-course meal: freshly-baked bread, one can of broccoli cheddar soup, a rainbow trout, seasoned and grilled. They had learned to eat slowly, to stretch out each course with conversation or some other diversion. That afternoon, Dee had perused a shelf of old paperbacks in the game closet, picked a David Morrell thriller, and now she read to them the first chapter during the soup course.

After supper, she boiled a pot of chamomile tea.

“That soup was excellent,” Jack said as she carried four steaming mugs over to the table, two in each hand. “You really outdid yourself.”

“Old family recipe, you know. The Campbells.”

“Who’s that?” Cole asked.

“Mom’s kidding around.”

“But seriously, Jack, the fish was incredible.”

He sipped his tea. Could’ve been stronger, but it felt so good just to hold the warm mug in his hands which were still raw from long hours of casting.

“Busy boy today, huh?” Dee said. “Four fish and how much wood did you cut?”

“I didn’t cut any wood.”

“Of course you did.”

He flashed a perplexed smile. “Um, I didn’t.”

“Are you joking?”

“About what?”

“Cutting firewood.”

“No, why?”

“I heard a chainsaw.”

Jack set his mug on the table and stared at Dee.

“When?” he asked.

“Late this afternoon.”

“Where was the sound of the chainsaw coming from?”

“The driveway. I thought you were taking down more trees.”

Cole said, “What’s wrong?”

“Jack, you’re playing around, and all things considered, what we’ve been through, this isn’t funny at—”

“I fished all day. Naomi, did you take the chainsaw out?” But he knew the answer before she spoke, because the mug was rattling against the table in her trembling hands.

Dee started to rise.

“No, don’t get up.”

“We have to—”

“Just listen.” Jack lowered his voice. “If people have found the cabin, then they’re probably watching us right now through that window at your back, waiting until we go to bed.”

“Waiting for what?” Naomi asked.

“Everyone drink your tea and act like we’re wrapping up a nice family evening.”

His mouth had run dry. He sipped his tea and let his eyes move briefly past Dee’s shoulder to the window behind the kitchen table, the only one in the house they hadn’t shielded with a blanket since it backed right up against the woods. Nothing to see at this hour, the sun long since set. Wondered if someone crouched out there in the dark at this moment, watching his family.

“You’re sure you heard it?” he said quietly. “The chainsaw?”

“Yes.”

“I heard it, too.” Tears rolling down Naomi’s face. “I thought it was you, Dad.”

Before supper, Jack had switched off the solar power system to recharge overnight and they’d eaten by firelight. Several candles lit the living room, too. One in each of the upstairs bedrooms.

“The shotgun and the Glock are under our bed,” Jack said. “I think we have a box of ammo for the Glock that’s mostly full, but we’re down to the last half-dozen twelve gauge shells.” He looked at Naomi, then Dee, then Cole. Hated the fear he saw. “We’re going to act like it’s just another normal night. I’ll put Cole to bed. Naomi, you head up to your room. Dee,

clear the table and get all the cans of food and whatever bread's left into a plastic bag, some silverware, too, and a can opener. We don't know how close they are to the cabin, if they can see inside, see us in the other rooms, so don't hurry, but don't take too much time either."

"What about all our meat?"

"Leave it. I'll come back downstairs and then Dee and I will blow out the living room and kitchen and bedroom candles. We'll dress in the dark, all of us, all the clothes we can wear, and then we'll meet in the other downstairs bedroom—the one near the shed. Naomi, you stay upstairs with your brother after I've left and listen for me to call you down. Got it?"

She was crying. "I don't want to leave."

"Me either, but can you do this, what I'm asking?"

She nodded.

"Look, maybe there's nobody out there, but we have to make sure, and we aren't safe in here until we know."

"Are we going to take the car?" Dee asked.

"No, because they probably have one blocking us in. I'm sure they were using the chainsaw to cut that tree I brought down across the driveway. So they could drive up. We just need to get into the woods and hide until I can figure out what's going on."

Jack carried his son through the kitchen, up the spiral staircase, and into the bedroom. Threw back the covers and laid Cole on the mattress.

"Naomi's right next door," Jack said. "You listen to your sister, okay?"

"Don't blow out the candle."

"I have to, buddy."

"I don't like it dark."

"Cole, I need you to be brave." He kissed the boy's forehead. "I'll see you real soon."

Jack extinguished the candle on the dresser and tried not to rush down the steps. The kitchen was already dark, the plastic bag of food tied off and sitting on the hearth. He blew out the candles on the coffee table and moved blindly toward his and Dee's bedroom, eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness.

Dee stood by the blanketed window.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

“Just peeking out at the meadow. Haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Let’s get going.”

Jack donned two more pipe-scented shirts, his fingers struggling with the buttons in the dark, heart slamming in his chest. When he’d dressed, he slid two shells into the Mossberg to replace the two he’d used on the elk. He crammed the four remaining into the side pocket of his jeans, grabbed the Mag-Lite from the bedside table drawer, and handed Dee the Glock.

In the living room, Jack called up to his children. Laced his trail shoes while Naomi and Cole descended the stairs, and they all went together past the fireplace into the second bedroom.

Jack crawled across the bed and tugged down the blanket Dee had tacked over the glass and unlatched the hasp.

The window slid up. The night cold rushed in.

Jack climbed over the sill, stepped down into the grass.

“All right, Cole, come on.”

He grabbed his son under his arms and hoisted him out of the cabin. “Stay right beside me, and don’t say a word.”

He helped Naomi through and then Dee. Lowered the window back and pulled his wife in close so he could whisper in her ear.

“We can’t leave without our packs. They’re in the back of the Rover, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait for me to call you over.”

Jack crept across the grass and peered around the corner of the cabin.

The meadow stretched into darkness.

No wind. No moon. No movement.

He sprinted twenty yards to the shed and crouched down behind it, straining to listen and hearing nothing but the internal combustion of his heart.

Jack blew a sharp, stifled whistle, then watched as Dee and the kids emerged from the shadows behind the cabin, running toward him, their pants swishing in the grass for eight agonizing seconds before they reached him.

“Did I do good?” Cole asked.

“You did great. Dee, I’m going around to the front of the shed to get our packs. If something goes wrong, you hear gunshots, me yelling, whatever,

take the kids into the woods, all the way back to the stream. I'll be able to find you there."

He rose to his feet, moved along the backside of the shed, the shotgun in one hand, flashlight in the other. Rounded the corner, the driveway looming just ahead. He jogged the edge of the woods until he came to it. The single lane descended out of meager starlight into the darkness of the aspen grove, and he followed it down until he came around the first hairpin turn. A Suburban blocked the way, its color indeterminate in the lowlight. A Datsun pickup truck behind it. He put a light through the glass and checked the ignitions of both vehicles. No keys. No idea how to hotwire a car.

He ran back up the driveway. After several minutes in the woods, the clearing appeared almost bright. Stood there for a moment scanning the meadow and the trees around the periphery, but the shadows kept their secrets so well he couldn't even see his family in the darkness behind the shed.

Twenty strides brought him to the side of it.

He swung around the corner and got his hand on the doorknob and the hinges ground together with a rusty shriek as he slipped inside.

A wave of disorientation accompanied the absolute, unflinching darkness.

Jack knelt down, laid the shotgun in the dirt, and fumbled with the head of the Mag-Lite, trying to turn it on.

Several feet away, a shuffle in the dirt.

Jack froze, bracing against a shot of liquid fear that made his scalp tingle and his throat constrict, thinking it could be a rodent or some tool that had shifted. Or someone pointing a gun at him. Or his frazzled imagination.

Two choices. See it or shoot it.

He lowered the flashlight back onto the dirt floor. As he felt around for the shotgun, a motor coughed ten feet away, like someone had pulled a start rope. Then it sputtered again and the shed filled with the reek of gas and the banshee-wail of a two-stroke. A small LED light cut on—affixed to the handle with black electrical tape—and it sent out a schizophrenic beam that hit the Rover, the shed walls, and the large, bearded man who came at Jack with the screaming chainsaw, gripped like a bat, spring-loaded to swing.

Jack grabbed the shotgun and jacked a shell as the man reached him, no time to stand or brace.

The blast knocked Jack onto his back in the dirt, and at point-blank range, cut the ski-jacketed man in half at the waist.

Jack clambered back onto his feet, pumped the shotgun again, lifted the Mag-Lite, and screwed the bulb to life.

The man still clutched the idling chainsaw, but only in one hand, having nearly severed his right leg at the knee.

Jack leaned down and flipped the kill switch.

In the renewed silence, the man emitted desperate drowning noises. Over them, Jack could hear Dee calling his name through the back wall of the shed. He went to it and put his mouth to the wood and said, “I’m okay. Go where we talked about right now. There’s more of them.”

He hurried over to the Rover and lifted his pack out of the cargo area, trying to recall what all it held, if it might be worth rifling through Dee’s pack or bringing it too, but there wasn’t time.

He shouldered his pack and clipped the hip belt and chest strap and went back over to the man in the ski jacket who’d turned sheet white and already bled a black lake across the dirt.

“How many of you are there?” Jack asked. But the man just stared up at him with a kind of glassy-eyed amazement and would not, or could not, speak.

Jack killed the Mag-Lite and eased open the door to the shed and peered out.

Already, they were halfway across the meadow—four shadows running toward him and two smaller, faster ones out ahead of the others.

He leveled the shotgun, squeezed off three blinding reports.

Four points of light answered, flashing in the dark like high-octane lightning bugs, and bullets struck the wood beside him and punched through the door above his head.

He stepped out and around the side and sprinted to the back of the shed.

His family was gone.

Lightning footsteps approached, the jingle of a chain, snarling. He turned back to see the pit bull tear around the corner, skidding sidelong across the grass trying to right its forward motion.

Jack raised the shotgun, the animal accelerating toward him, and fired as it leapt for his throat, the buckshot instantly arresting its momentum. He pumped the slide and took aim on the second pit bull which ripped around

the corner with greater efficiency. He dropped it whimpering and tumbling through the grass.

Jack ran ten feet into the woods and slid out of his pack. He prostrated himself behind a log. Couldn't hear a thing over his own panting and he closed his eyes and buried his face in the leaves until the pounding in his chest decelerated.

When he looked up again, four figures stood behind the shed where his family had hid just moments ago. Three others joined them.

Someone said, "Where's Frank?"

"In the field. He caught some pellets in his neck."

A woman walked over, the helve of an ax resting on her shoulder.

She said, "I saw someone run into the woods a minute ago."

A beam of light struck the ground. "Let's head in. Only four. And two of them children."

Another light.

Another.

Someone shot their beam through the woods. Jack ducked behind the log, the light slanting past him, firing the fringes of the bark. They were still talking, but he'd lost their voices with his face jammed up under the log and straining to fish the twelve gauge shells out of his pocket. Jack was on the brink of shifting to another position but the footfalls stopped him.

They approached him now—must have been all eight of them—filling the woods with the dry rasp of crushing leaves. Someone stepped over the log and the heel of a boot came down inches from Jack's left arm. He caught the scent of rancid body odor. He watched them move by, eight distinct fields of light sweeping the woods. He wondered how far in his family had made it, if Dee had any concept of what was coming her way.

After a while, he rolled out from under the log and sat up. Glanced back toward the shed. Into the woods again. He could hear the footfalls growing softer, indistinguishable and collective like steady rain, glimpsed the bulbs of distant light and occasionally a full beam where it swung through mist.

Jack dug into his pocket for the shells, fed in the last four.

Six rounds. Eight people.

He stood up and got his pack on.

Jacked a shell, started toward the lights.

After forty yards, the stream-murmur filtered in, and soon there was nothing but the sound of it and the cool, sweet smell of the water.

He eased down onto the bank. The lights had moved on. Blackness everywhere. Thinking he'd told Dee to get to the stream, but she may have seen the group of flashlights coming, been forced to go elsewhere. The urge to call out for her overwhelmed him.

He got up, started hiking again.

Sometimes the starlight would find a way down through the trees and he would catch a glimpse of the stream like black glass, warped and fissured, but mainly it was impossible to see anything. He didn't dare use the Mag-Lite.

Fifteen minutes of blind groping brought him a quarter mile uphill.

He collapsed in a patch of cold, damp sand and stared back the way he'd come. He tried to catch his breath, but the longer he sat there the panic festered inside of him. Finally he rose to his feet, running uphill now, running until his heart felt like it was going to swell out of his chest. He went on like this for he didn't know how long, and every time he stopped it was still just him alone in the woods and the dark.

THE violence of his own shivering woke him.

Jack lifted his head out of the leaves. Dawn. A moment before. Frail blue light upon everything in the brutal cold. He had dreamed but they were too sweet and vivid to linger on.

Worked his way up the mountain for thirty minutes before stopping streamside by a boulder covered in frosted moss. He looked around. Wiped his eyes. Considered all the ways they could have fucked this up—he might have gone upstream when he should've hiked down, or Dee and the kids had pushed hard all night and gotten too far ahead of him, or he'd unknowingly passed them in the dark, or maybe they hadn't even stayed with the stream and become lost elsewhere on this endless mountain.

Another two hundred yards and he came around a large boulder, saw three people lying huddled together in the leaves on the opposite bank.

He stopped. Looked down at his shoes. Looked up again. Still there, and he didn't quite believe it, even as he rock-hopped to the other side of the

stream.

Dee stirred at the sound of his footsteps, then bolted upright with the Glock trained on his chest. He smiled and his eyes burned and then he was holding her as she shook with sobs.

“Do you know how easy it would’ve been for you to pass us by in the dark?” she whispered.

“But that didn’t happen,” he said.

“I heard all those gunshots. I thought you had—”

“That didn’t happen. I found you.”

“I didn’t know if we should wait or keep going, and then I saw all those lights in the woods, and we just—”

“You did exactly what you should have.”

Naomi sat up and rubbed her eyes. She looked at her father, scowling.

“Hey,” she said.

“Morning, Sunshine.”

“We can’t go back,” Jack said. He was staring down at the bag of soupcans Dee had brought and the contents of his backpack, which he’d spread out in the leaves. A tent. Two sleeping bags. Water filter. Camp stove. Map. Not much else.

“But what if they leave?”

“Why would they? I saw their cars, Dee. They have no provisions, haven’t fallen in with a big group, so they’re facing the same problems we were—no gas, no water, no food. And they just stumbled across all those things at the cabin, plus shelter, plus two hundred pounds of meat in the freezer.”

“Jack, that place is perfect. We could have—”

“There’s eight of them. Eight armed adults. We’d be slaughtered.”

“Well, I don’t much feel like wandering aimlessly through the wilderness.”

“Not aimlessly, Dee.” He knelt down and opened the Wyoming roadmap. “We’re here,” he said, “northern edge of the Wind Rivers. We’re actually not that far from the east side of the mountains.” He traced a black line north. “Let’s shoot for this highway.”

“How far is it?”

“Fifteen, twenty miles tops.”

“Jesus. And then what, Jack?” He could hear the emotion rising in her voice. “We reach this road in the middle of nowhere, and then what?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Well, I know. We’ll need a big fucking miracle. Because that’s how we’re going to stay alive from here on out, Jack. Big fucking miracles. That’s how bad a shape we’re in, and you want us to hike across these—” Her voice broke and she turned away and walked off into the woods.

“Mom.” Naomi started after her, but Jack caught his daughter’s arm.

“Let her go, baby. Just give her a minute.”

They were all day hiking the mountainside. The aspen giving way to evergreens the higher they climbed. The stream shrinking toward headwaters, burbling softer and softer, until at last it disappeared into a rocky hole in the mountain, never to be heard from again.

Stopped while there was still plenty of light at a small lake at nine thousand feet. It backed up against a two hundred-foot cliff which had calved a rock glacier into the water—giant boulders half-submerged on the far side.

Jack raised the tent and collected fir cones and browned needles and more wood than they could burn in three nights.

He walked to the edge of the lake as the sun fell. The water looked black. So still as to suggest ice or obsidian, except for the slow concentric circles that eddied out when a trout surfaced. He kept reminding himself what a beautiful place this was, that they could be suffering on the East Coast, or in Albuquerque, or be dead like so many others. But somehow the bright side of things had burned out tonight, and the light draining out of the sky and the lake’s reflection of it just felt tragic.

He glanced back at his family—sitting outside the tent, waiting for him to get the fire going. Got up and started toward them. A day’s worth of walking in his swollen knees and lots more of that to come.

His children looked up at his approach.

He forced himself to smile.

In the middle of the night, Cole said, “What’s that sound?”

Jack lay beside him on the sleeping bag. It had woken him, too, and he whispered, “Just that rockfall across the lake.”

“Is someone throwing rocks?”

“No, they’re shifting.”

“What are those splashes?”

“Fish jumping out of the water.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You want me to go out there and tell them to cut it out?”

“Yes.”

“It’s okay. I promise. Go back to sleep.”

“No one’s coming after us?”

“We’re safe up here, Cole.”

“I’m hungry.”

“We’ll eat something in the morning.”

“First thing?”

“First thing.”

The boy fell back asleep almost instantly but Jack lay awake, trying to ignore the rock jutting up through the bottom of the sleeping bag into his side. The moon was bright through the tent walls. He listened to everyone’s heavy breathing, thinking how, in his lifetime, he’d lain awake at night worrying over so much pointless shit—money, his job, a fight he’d had with Dee—and now that he had real life and death stuff to obsess about, all he wanted to do was sleep.

A film of ice rimmed the lake. Steam lifting off the surface in the early morning sun. Jack was on the grassy bank pumping water through the filter into a stainless steel pot. He boiled the water, added three packets of oatmeal from his emergency kit, and they sat around the smoking remnants of the campfire, passing the pot and trying to wake up.

After breakfast, they broke down the tent and packed up and headed out while there was still frost on the dying grasses.

They followed no trail.

With his compass, Jack marked a cirque of forbidding granite spires ten miles away as their definitive eastern goal.

They climbed all morning through a spruce forest, emerging at midday onto a broad, ascending ridge of meadows.

Herds of unattended cattle grazed the open range.

Mountains in every direction and the warm, adobe glow of desert to the east.

In the early afternoon, Cole began to complain that his legs hurt.

Dee took over Jack's pack, and Jack put his son on his shoulders.

They'd all drunk plenty of water with breakfast but had since sweated it out under the high-altitude sun. Jack could feel a dehydration headache coming on. They'd all be suffering soon.

They pushed on in silence, everyone too tired, too thirsty to talk.

In the evening they came down into a valley that framed a lake. Naomi crying as she shuffled along on the sides of her blistered feet, telling everyone she was okay, that she could make it to the water.

Jack assembled the filter and pumped while his family drank straight from the plastic tube. Fifteen minutes to satisfy their thirst, and then Dee pumped for him, Jack lying in the cool grass and letting the freezing lake water run down his throat and over his sunburned face.

He felt delirious, his head undergoing a slow implosion, and it was all he could do to construct the tent. A fire was out of the question, and he didn't want to eat—no one did—but Dee opened a can for each of them and handed out three tablets of maximum strength Tylenol apiece.

"I'll just throw up," Jack said.

"No, you won't. You'll keep it down. We're all severely dehydrated and suffering from altitude sickness." She handed him a can of pork and beans. "Get it in you, and drink some more water, and go to bed."

His family slept but the agony in Jack's head would not relent. He crawled outside a little after midnight and staggered to the edge of the lake. Bitter cold. Moon shadows everywhere. He lowered himself onto his hands and knees and dipped his head through a crust of ice into the water.

IN the morning the pain had eased. He could hear his family up and about outside. Almost hot inside the tent with the sun beating down. He

didn’t remember coming to bed. Couldn’t recall much of the preceding night in fact. His head mushy, like he was coming off a bender.

They were eating down by the lake and he joined them. The sun already higher than he would’ve liked. They’d be getting a late start.

“How we doing?” he asked.

“Aces,” Naomi said.

He sat beside his daughter and she passed him her can.

He sipped the cold corn chowder. “How are your feet, angel?”

“They don’t look too pretty anymore. Mom wrapped them up.”

“We need to start sleeping with our food,” Dee said. “There’s ice crystals in my cream of mushroom.”

“I personally like ice in my soup,” Jack said.

Cole laughed.

“I wouldn’t exactly call this rationing,” Jack said, handing the can back to Naomi.

“We have to eat, Jack. We’re expending so much energy in these mountains.”

“What are we down to?”

“Eight cans.”

“Jesus.”

The climb up the east slope of the valley took them into the early afternoon, and then they finally broke out above the timberline onto the top of a knoll. Those granite spires loomed several miles to the east, their summits puncturing the low cloud deck. Not a tree in sight and rock everywhere. Four lakes visible from where they stood. The water blue-gray under the clouds.

They hiked east as the clouds lowered.

It grew dark early and a fine, cold mist began to fall, but they pushed on to the farthest lake at the foot of the cirque, everyone wet and shivering as they raised the tent on one of the few patches of level grass.

Stripped out of their wet clothes. Climbed in and Jack zipped them up. They huddled under the sleeping bags and listened to rain patter on the tent and watched the light fade out.

“Can I say something?” Naomi said. “Something not very nice, but it’ll make me feel better?”

“Baby, you can say whatever you want.”

“This. Fucking. Sucks.”

They ate supper and Jack dressed in dry clothes. He dug the water filter and pot out of his pack.

“Back in a bit,” he said.

Slipped on his wet trail shoes and crawled outside.

Down to the lakeshore, crouched by the water. His breath pluming in the blue dusk. He strained to pick out the voices of his family, wanted to hear them talking, but nothing broke the awesome silence.

Across the lake, he made out the faintest impression of the cirque. No texture, no detail. Just a charcoal silhouette of a jagged ridgeline several thousand feet above. The ghost of a mountain.

He filled the pot and carried it to the tent.

“This one’s for Naomi.” he said.

Watched his daughter gulp it down in two long, ravenous sips.

He pumped a pot for Cole, then another for Dee, and went back outside one last time to drink his fill.

The cirque had vanished, the dusk deepened, and flakes of snow mixed in with the rain. He stopped halfway through filling the pot. His hands were trembling.

Get it over with. If you have to lose it, lose it here.

He buried his face in the bend of his arm and cried into it until there was nothing left.

They nestled together in the cold and the dark, Jack and Dee on the outside, the kids between them. No one had spoken in a long time and Jack finally said, “Everyone all right?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess.”

“Yes.”

“Wow, that was so convincing.”

“This the worst trouble you ever been through, Dad?”

“Yeah, Na. Far and away.”

Cole said, “Are we going to die?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“Because that isn’t going to happen to our family. I’m not going to let it happen. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Goodnight, all.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

“You know I love you all, right? Do I say it enough?”

“Yes, Dad, you do.”

For a split second, a flash of the Naomi of old—sassy, sarcastic, acerbic.

It elicited his sole smile of the day.

A fragile inch of snow clung to the tent and glazed the rocks. Jack stared at the sky and the lake which reflected the sky—deep cobalt. He was hungry. Starving actually. But the purity of the morning light moved him with a fleeting weightlessness that broke his heart to see it go.

The cirque loomed. Simply no avoiding it. He stood there in the cold trying to see a route, but it all looked steep as hell. Like a stupid fucking thing to even consider, fact aside that he needed to get his seven-year-old son up and over it.

He woke his family, and while Naomi and Cole launched snowballs at each other, Dee pulled the stitches out of Jack’s shoulder. Then they packed up, re-bandaged their blistered feet, drank as much water as their stomachs could hold, and struck out before the sun had cleared the ridge.

They walked around the perimeter of the lake and into a field of car-size boulders. Didn’t even begin to climb until after lunchtime, which passed unacknowledged. By mid-afternoon the snow had vanished except for in the shadows and they were a thousand feet above the lake which shone like a diamond in the valley’s hand.

Cole had already arrived at the threshold of his endurance with Naomi not far behind, but they kept climbing, even as they cried, the rocks getting smaller and the slope steeper and the sun plunging toward night.

They would climb in increments of fifty feet and then stop while Cole fell apart and Dee and Jack calmed him and primed him to go just a little farther. Big, bold lies that they were almost there.

At four-thirty, Jack gave his pack to Dee and lifted his son onto his shoulders. Climbed another hundred feet and when he stopped this time, the sun perched on the western horizon and it hit him that they'd gone as far as they were going to make it today, that they'd be spending the night on the side of this mountain. He looked up, head swimming. The rock pink, summit spires glowing in the late sun.

"Let's stop," he said.

"Stop?"

"We should find a place to hunker down."

"For the night?" Naomi said.

"Yeah."

"Where's the tent going to go?"

"No tent tonight, sweetie."

Naomi eased down onto the loose rock and the sound of his daughter crying swept down into the basin.

Jack let Cole off his shoulders and crawled over to her.

"I'm sorry, Na. I'm so sorry. I know this is hard."

"I hate it."

"Me, too, but we're going to find the best spot on this mountain. Think about the view we'll have."

"I don't give a shit about the view."

"Yeah, me neither."

"I hate this fucking mountain."

"I know, sweetie, I know."

Jack collapsed in the dirt on the downslope side of the largest stable boulder he could find, his hands raw from eight hours of climbing, eyes irritated with dust. They reclined back against the mountain using their spare clothes for pillows and blanketed under the two sleeping bags. Not a cloud in the sky and everything still and Jack praying it would stay that way.

Already it was freezing. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and Jack could see seven lakes on that treeless tableland below. Each oilblack in the

dusk.

Somewhere below, a band of coyotes yapped.

Jack cracked open the last four cans of food and they ate in silence watching the last bit of sun drain away.

The planets faded in and then the stars and soon the sky swarmed with pinpricks of ancient light and they slept, dug into the side of the mountain.

JACK woke cold and stiff and thirsty. His family slept, Cole burrowed into his side completely under the sleeping bag, and Jack let them sleep, a temporary escape from the diamond-cut hardness of this place. The panic was certainly there. Felt it lingering in his blindspot, trying to break in. He'd gotten them into a terrible bind, it whispered—out of food, out of water, twelve thousand feet up a mountain they had no business climbing. He'd utterly failed them, and now they were going to die.

Naomi said, "A box of Fruit Loops, and I don't mean one of those little ones."

"Family size."

"Exactly. I'd pour the whole thing into one of our glass mixing bowls and open a carton of cold whole milk. Oh my God, I can almost taste it."

"Lucky Charms," Cole said. "Except just the marshmallows and chocolate milk."

"I would kill for one of those southwest breakfast burritos from that place near campus," Dee said. "Filled with scrambled eggs and chorizo sausage and green chiles. Couple fried cinnamon rolls. Steaming cup of dark roast. Jack?"

"Bacon, short stack, two eggs over easy, biscuits smothered in sausage gravy. Everything, and I mean everything, drowned in maple syrup and hot sauce."

"No coffee?"

"Of course coffee. Goes without saying. Might even splash some bourbon in it. Start the day off right."

They got underway, climbing in shadow, the rock still freezing. Logged another two hundred feet and then emerged from the loose talus onto solid

granite, the steepest pitch they'd seen, Dee leading now and Jack climbing under his kids, all four appendages on the mountain.

He was reaching for the next handhold when Dee said, "Holy shit, Jack."

"What?"

"Have you looked down?"

He looked down. The sweep of the mountain falling away beneath them nothing short of a total mindfuck.

"That looks way worse than it is," Jack said, though he felt like he was going to be sick. He shut his eyes and leaned into the mountain, clutching it, his chest heaving against the rock. "Just keep climbing," he said. "Don't look down if it bothers you."

"It doesn't bother me," Cole said.

"Good, but you be as careful as can be," Jack said. "Na?"

"I'm fucking freaked."

"I know it's scary, but a little less profanity, angel."

"I can't do this, Jack. There's no way."

"Dee, you want to know something?"

"What?"

"We're kicking ass. Think of all we've been through since—"

"This is the worst."

"Worse than getting shot at? Than some of the things we've seen?"

"For me it is. I've had nightmares about this before. Being stuck on a cliff."

"Well, we aren't stuck, and we have to get over this mountain. That's all there is to it."

"My legs are shaking, Jack."

"You can do this. You have to do this."

They started to climb again, Jack hanging back, watching their progression, monitoring how comfortable Naomi and Cole looked on the rock, telling them how good they were doing and struggling to hide his own fear.

It was almost worse looking up the mountain. He couldn't see the spires anymore, had no idea how close or far they were from the summit ridge. It was just cold, fissured rock and the deep blue sky above it all and a blinding cornice of sunshine.

He worked his way up a series of ledges in a wide dihedral, and it occurred to him as he climbed that even if they wanted to, going back down now would be an impossibility.

"We taking a rest?" he asked.

His family stood just above him on a grassy ledge and he climbed the last few feet to them.

"This is bad, Jack."

"What?"

"This." She patted the vertical rock. "It just got steeper."

"There's another way up," he said. "Has to be." He stepped around Naomi and followed the ledge along the rockface, which slimmed down after twenty feet to a lip barely sufficient to support the toes of his shoes.

He sidestepped back over to them. "That way's no good," he said, staring up the rock that Dee leaned against. Certainly steeper than anything they'd been on thus far, but the handholds and footholds were prominent, and twelve feet above, a wide crack opened.

"I think we can climb this," he said.

"Are you crazy?"

"Watch."

He reached up, slid his fingers into a crack, and pulled himself up. Jammed his foot into a ledge.

"There's no way, Jack."

"This really isn't bad," he said, though he could feel the threat of a tremor in his right leg, which at the moment, held all of his weight. He lifted his left foot onto a bulging rock and went for another handhold. Seven feet above the grassy ledge now and the world tilting, an ocean of open air underneath him.

Nothing to do but keep climbing.

The next move brought him to the crack and he squeezed into a space no larger than a coffin.

"Send the kids up," he said.

"Jack, come on."

"Just do it, Dee. Cole, can you climb to me, buddy?"

"If they fall—"

"No one's going to fall. Don't even put that thought in their head."

“I can do it, Mom.”

Cole reached up, pulled himself onto the rock. “Spot him, Dee.”

“No, Cole.”

“You have to let him go.”

She cried as she raised her arms, said, “Move out of the way, Na, in case he slips. I don’t want him knocking you off the mountain. Cole, you be so careful, baby.”

The boy moved up the rock as if he had no concept of the price for falling. Jack on his knees in the nook, stretching his right arm down as the boy came within range.

“Cole, grab my hand, and I’ll pull you up.”

Cole reached.

Jack got a solid grasp on his wrist, heaved his boy up the rest of the way.

With the cumbersome pack and the shotgun tied to it, the two of them took up every square inch of the recess.

“Dee, you still have the Glock, right?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I have to get rid of this pack.”

“Jack, no, it has our tent, our sleeping bags, our—”

“I know, believe me. Last thing I want to do, but I can’t move in this crack with the pack on, and I’ve almost fallen twice because of it getting caught up.”

He unhooked the hip belt.

“Jack, please. Think about this.”

“I have.”

“We have to have a tent.”

He unclipped the chest strap.

“We’ll make do.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Look out, both of you.” He slid out of the shoulder straps and slung the pack hard enough to clear the ledge.

It fell uninterrupted for a hundred and fifty feet, then struck rock, then bounced through a series of echoing ricochets for another four hundred feet until it vanished in the upper realm of the boulder field, the delayed sound of its ongoing fall still audible.

“All right, Naomi,” Jack said, “it’s all you.”

She began to climb, either more careful or less sure of herself than Cole.

Halfway to the crack, she froze.

“I’m stuck,” she said.

“You’re not stuck. There’s a great handhold a couple feet up.”

“I can’t hold on much longer. My fingers are—”

“Listen to me, Na. Reach above you and pull yourself up. If you get to that point, I can grab you.”

She looked up at him, tears streaming from the corners of her eyes and so much fear, her entire body trembling, knuckles blanching from the sheer strain of clutching the rock.

“I’m slipping, Daddy.”

“Naomi. Reach up right now or you’re going to fall.”

She lunged for the handhold, and Jack saw her miss it, fingers dancing across smooth rock. He reached so far down he nearly fell out of the nook, catching her wrist as she came off the mountain, her feet dangling over the ledge, one hundred and five pounds slowly tugging Jack’s shoulder out of socket and dragging him off the nook.

“Oh my God, Jack.”

“I’ve got her. Get your feet on the rock, Na.”

“I’m trying.”

“Don’t try. Do it.” She found purchase and Jack pulled with everything he had, walking her up the rock and then over the ledge, all three of them crammed into the nook and Naomi crying hysterically.

“Have a nice life, guys,” Dee said, “because there is no fucking way.”

“Come on, sweetheart. Get up here. It’s cake from here on out.”

“Honestly?”

“Maybe cake is too strong a word. It’s shortbread. How’s that?”

“I hate you so much.”

But she started to climb.

Moving up the crack proved easier, if only because of the illusion of safety—boxed in on three sides and plenty of handholds. They climbed all morning, blisters forming on Jack’s fingertips, and he kept wondering how close it was to midday, the adrenaline rush having skewed his perception of time. Doubted their morale could withstand another night on this mountain.

Thirty feet above, Cole hollered.

Jack's heart stopped. He looked up, the sun burning down, couldn't see a thing through its cutting-torch glare.

He shouted, "Everyone okay?"

Dee yelled back, "We're at the top."

Jack stood on the ridge, bracing against the wind and staring east. The mountain fell away beneath them toward pine-covered foothills that downsloped into high desert. Several miles out and one vertical mile below, a highway ran north.

"There it is," Jack said. "I don't see any cars on it."

"Backside of this mountain doesn't look too awful," Dee said.

"No, just long as hell."

Dee lowered herself off the ridge.

"Ready to get off this rock, huh?"

"Like you can't even imagine."

They descended the east slope—a steep boulder field streaked with last year's snow that was hard as asphalt—and evening was coming on by the time they stumbled out of it into the spruce. After two full days on nothing but rock, the moist dirt floor felt like sponge under Jack's feet. He was too tired and sore to register hunger, but his thirst verged on desperation.

"Should we stop?" Dee asked as they hiked through the darkening woods. "I mean, it's not like we need to find the perfect spot for our tent or anything. Any old piece of ground will do."

"A stream would be nice," he said.

Jack stopped four times so they could hush and listen for the sound of running water, but they never heard it, and exhaustion finally won out.

Jack climbed under a huge spruce tree and broke off as many lower limbs as his strength would allow. His family joined him under the overhanging branches, and they all lay huddled together on the forest floor.

Dee reached over, held Jack's hand.

Cole already asleep.

Hardly any light left in the sky, and what little there was struggled to pass through the spiderweb of branches. Jack wanted to say something to Dee

and Naomi before they drifted off, something about how proud he was of them, but he made the mistake of closing his eyes while he tried to think of what he should say.

He woke once in the middle of the night. Pitch black and the patter of rainfall all around them. The branches thick enough over where they slept to keep them dry. Jack's body was cold but he could still feel the glow of the sunburn in his face. Brightness when he shut his eyes. Thinking, water is falling out there. Water. But thirsty as he was, he couldn't bring himself to move.

THE woods smelled of last night's rainfall and everything still dripped. They could've laid there all day under the tree watching the light spill through the branches, but he made them get up. Two full days since their last sip of water at that high lake on the other side of the mountain, and he fought a raging headache.

They left while it was still early. No trail to follow but the path of least resistance, slowly winding their way down through the spruce. Cole couldn't walk, so Jack carried him on his shoulders. He felt dizzy, his legs cramping, thinking he should have dragged them all out from under the tree last night and made a catch for the rain. They were dying of thirst, and he'd let a shot at water pass them by.

Midafternoon and stumbling through the woods like zombies. Back down into pine trees, descending toward desert and the heat of it and the tang of dry sage in the upslope wind.

They would've missed it but for Cole.

The boy said, "Look." Pointed toward a boulder a little ways off in the trees with a dark streak running down its face that glimmered where the sun struck it.

Jack lifted his son off his shoulders and set him down and ran for it, hurdling two logs and sliding to a stop on his knees in the wet mud at the base.

A steady trickle the width of a string ran off the lip of the rock. He bent down and took a sip, just one to make sure it tasted safe, the water down his throat so cold and sweet he had to physically tear himself away from it.

“How is it?” Dee said. “Safe to drink?”

“Like nothing you ever tasted.” Jack stood, traced the stream to where it disappeared into rock. “It’s a spring,” he said. “Come here, Cole.” He helped his son down onto the wet mud and held his mouth under the stream for thirty seconds.

“All right, buddy, let’s give sister a shot.”

They each got a half minute under the trickle, and then, beginning with Cole, took turns, each as long as they wanted, drinking their fill.

It was torture watching his children gulp down mouthful after mouthful, so Jack wandered away from the boulder to look for a place for them to sleep. Came upon it almost instantly—a stretch of dirt underneath an overhang that would probably keep them dry unless a wild storm blew in. He picked out all of the rocks from the dirt and found some patches of moss nearby which he peeled off the ground and spread out like plush moist carpeting. He sat down on the moss in the shade of the overhang and stared at the sky through the tops of the trees. Didn’t have his watch but he bet it was four or five in the afternoon. The light getting long and the clouds dissipating. The chill coming.

While his family slept, Jack lay under the trickle of water. It took fourteen seconds for his mouth to fill, and then he’d swallow and open again. Laid there forty minutes watching the sky darken, drinking until his stomach bloated and sloshed.

Their wet clothes froze during the night and they lay shivering under the overhang while the moon lifted above the desert. Jack got up and wandered out into the woods and broke off as many limbs as he could find. All pine—the needles densely clustered. Carried an armful back to their pitiful camp and laid the branches over the tangle of bodies that comprised his family.

He stood watching them.

Looked back toward the west, the mountain they’d scaled looming in the dark.

Broken granite shining in the moonlight.

And he felt something like a drug enter his bloodstream—several heartbeats of pride coursing through him, only it wasn't really pride. Just knowledge. Clarity. A brief window passing through his field of vision. He saw himself objectively, what he'd done, how with his hands and his brain and his handling of fear, he'd kept his family alive this far, a realization surfacing, and it was this: a part of him needed this, loved this, loved being strong for them, going hungry and thirsty for them, even killing for them. He knew he would do it again and without a moment's hesitation. Hell, a part of him might even welcome it. There was simply nothing in his experience that even compared with the thrill of killing to protect his family. In this moment, it was the purpose of his existence.

He felt, possibly for the first time in his life, like a fucking man.

At last, he crawled under the branches and wrapped his arms around his son.

Cole's teeth chattered. "I'm cold," the boy said.

"You'll warm up."

"When?"

"In a minute."

"Can you die of cold?"

"Yeah, but that's not going to happen to you."

"I'm still not warm."

"Be patient. It's coming."

JACK woke at dawn and laid his hands upon his children.

"They're breathing," Dee whispered.

"You sleep?"

"Not much."

"We stink," he said.

"Speak for yourself."

"No, I think I can safely speak for you, too."

He looked at his wife just to look at her. First time he'd done that in days.

Her cheeks smeared with dirt. Lips cracked. Sunburned all to hell.

"You've got a few dreadlocks starting there," he said.

"I'm hideous, aren't I?"

"Maybe a tad."

“You smoothtalker.” She reached across the kids, touched his hand. “We can’t keep doing this,” she said. “You know that, don’t you?”

“We’re almost out of these mountains, Dee. It’s going to get better then.”

“Or worse.”

“Do you believe we’re headed for someplace safe, where we can survive? Maybe get back what we lost?”

“I don’t know, Jack.”

“I think you need to believe that’s what’s going to happen.”

“It’s just so hard. I’m so tired. I’m hungry. And then I look at them and know they’re suffering even more.”

“We could be dead, Dee. All of us or some of us. But we’re not. We’re together. You have to hold onto that. Let it carry you.”

They came out of the woods in the late morning onto a bare hill that sloped down to a river, and several hundred yards past, a paved road. Beyond it all to the east lay miles of badlands—pale, dry country, rippled and treeless.

They worked their way down through the sage to the riverbank and stopped for a drink.

Jack lifted Cole onto his shoulders and waded across, Dee and Naomi following behind, his daughter gasping at the icy shock of the water, which was low in advance of winter, coming only to their knees at the deepest point.

On the other side, at the top of a small rise, they rested in the weeds and watched the road.

Nothing passed. No sound but the river and the wind blowing through the grass.

Early afternoon and low gray clouds streaming across the sky from the west.

Jack stepped into the road. Saw a quarter mile of it from where he stood.

Looking back, that rampart of mountains they’d crossed two days ago soared above everything, powdered with snow.

“What if a car comes?” Dee said. “There’s no way to know if they’re affected.”

“We’ll have to make a split-second decision,” Jack said. “If it’s only one car, with one or two people inside, maybe we chance it. Otherwise, we hide.”

They walked north along the shoulder.

“Let me have the gun, Dee.”

She handed him the Glock and he ejected the magazine, thumbed out the rounds—nine—and loaded them back.

“Do you know what road this is?” Dee asked.

“I think it’s Highway 287.”

“Where does it go?”

“To the Tetons, then north up to Yellowstone and into Montana.”

“We want to go to Montana?” Naomi asked.

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

“Because after Montana comes Canada, and we might be safe there.”

They walked for several hours. No cars passed. The road seemed to be some kind of geographic dividing line—badlands to the east, foothills rising toward mountains in the west.

The clouds thickened and by late afternoon the first raindrops had begun to splatter on the pavement. They had walked about two miles, Jack figured, and hadn’t seen a glimmer of civilization beyond the telephone poles that ran alongside the west shoulder of the road.

“We have to get out of this rain,” Jack said.

They went across the road and up into the trees—tall, straight pines that offered little in the way of shelter.

It was getting dark and the sound of the rainfall filled the woods with a steady hiss.

They sat down against one of the pines, and Jack could instantly feel the difference in his legs from just a few hours of walking on pavement. His knees swollen. Shins riddled with pain like a million tiny fractures. He grimaced as he stood back up.

“I’m going to look for something to keep us dry.”

“Please don’t go far, Jack.”

He wandered away from them up the hillside through the old-growth forest.

After a quarter mile, he came out of the trees.

Stopped, chuckled.

He led them up through the woods into the clearing, gestured proudly toward their accommodations for the evening—the ruins of a stable.

“It ain’t the Hilton,” he said. “But it’ll keep us dry.”

The logs were so weathered and sun-bleached they looked albino. The tin roof, deep brown with rust, only covered half of the shelter, and they filed into the far right corner on the only patch of dry dirt.

The rain drummed on the tin roof.

“We’re lucky to be out of the mountains,” Jack said. “Probably snowing up there.”

Through the doorway, they could see the rain falling and watch the world getting dark—a grayness deepening toward blue.

Cole crawled into Jack’s lap, said, “My stomach hurts.”

“I know, buddy, we’re all hungry.”

“When can we eat?”

“We’ll find something tomorrow.”

“You promise?”

“He can’t promise, Cole,” Naomi said. “He doesn’t know for sure if we’ll find anything to eat tomorrow. All we can do is try.”

Cole began to cry.

Jack kissed his head, Cole’s hair still wet, said, “Hush, baby boy.”

It was still raining. They hadn’t moved from their corner and they weren’t going to be moving anytime soon with it so black out there they couldn’t see their hands in front of their faces.

“I wish we could have a fire,” Naomi said.

“That would be nice.”

“I know how,” Cole said suddenly, just a voice in the dark.

“How to have a fire?” Dee said.

“How we can tell if they’re good or bad.”

“Who are you talking about, honey?”

“If we hear a car coming down the road.”

“You’ve been thinking about that?”

“If they have the light around them, we’ll know they’re bad.”

Jack said, “What light, buddy?”

“The light around their head.”

“What’s he talking about, Jack?”

“I have no idea. Cole, what light do you mean? Do we have it around any of us? Me or your mother or sister?”

“No.”

“Do you have it around you?”

The boy was quiet for a moment. “Yes.”

“What does it look like?”

“Like white light around my head and my shoulders.”

“Why is it around you and not us?”

“Because you didn’t see the lights. They didn’t fall on you.”

“Remember when I asked you if you felt different after the aurora?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any bad feelings toward any of us right now?”

“No, Daddy.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I don’t want to sleep in here with him.”

“Stop it, Naomi. He’s your brother.”

“He’s affected. He saw the lights like the rest of those crazy—”

“He’s a child.”

“So what?”

“Has he tried to hurt you or any of us?”

“No.”

“So maybe it doesn’t affect children the same way.”

“Why would that be?” Dee asked.

“I don’t know. Because they’re innocent?”

Cole began to cry. “I don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“I know you don’t,” Jack said, and he pulled the boy into his arms.

Jack woke several hours later to Cole moaning.

“Dee?”

“What is it?”

Still couldn’t see a thing in the dark.

“Something’s wrong with Cole. He’s shivering.”

Dee’s hand slid over his and onto the boy’s face.

“Oh, Jesus, he’s burning up.”

“Why’s he shaking?”

“He has the chills. Let me have him.”

She took Cole into her arms and rocked him and hushed him and Jack lay in the dirt as the sound of rain striking the tin roof tried to carry him off.

COLE looked pale in the gray dawnlight that filtered into the ruins of the stable.

Jack said, “What is it do you think?”

“I can’t tell if it’s viral or bacterial, but it’s getting worse.”

“We’ll stay here for the day. Let him rest.”

“A fever is very dehydrating. He needs water.”

“You want to keep moving?”

“I think we have to.”

“What else can we do for him?”

Tears welling, she shook her head. “Let’s try to find some water, then get him someplace warm and dry. That’s all we can do.”

Dark swollen clouds.

Cold.

Everything wet and dripping.

Jack carried Cole in his arms.

The boy had woken but his eyes were milky and unfocused. Not present.

They went down through the pine forest to the road.

The first mile was a straight and steady climb. Then the road curved through a series of switchbacks, and when Jack looked down again, Cole was sleeping.

In the bend of the next turn, he stopped and squatted down in the road, keeping Cole’s head supported so he wouldn’t wake.

“There’s no way,” Jack said. “I could carry him on my shoulders for a little while longer, but not like this.”

“We can rest,” Dee said.

“Resting isn’t going to make my arms stronger. He weighs fifty-four pounds. I just can’t physically hold him.”

He looked around. They had hiked up into snow—a sloppy inch of it upon everything except the asphalt, the evergreen branches dipping and bouncing back as the snow sloughed off.

“Jack, what do you—”

“Just let me rest for a minute. He’s sleeping, and I don’t want to wake him.”

They sat in the road. Everything still except the melting snow. The wind in the spruce trees. Cole shivered in his sleep and Jack wrapped his jacket around him. Every five minutes, Dee would lay her hand against the boy’s forehead.

Naomi asked, “Is he going to die?”

“Of course not,” Jack said.

They ate enough snow to quench their thirst and make them all much colder, and Jack fed Cole pieces of slush. After an hour, they struggled onto their feet and went on. The road kept climbing. Soon there was slush on the pavement, then snow. Instead of cradling him, Jack found he could manage the weight better by carrying Cole draped over his left shoulder. They would walk a ways and then stop and start up again, the periods of walking getting shorter, the rests longer.

It snowed off and on through the day, the road leading them back up into high country. Toward late afternoon, they came across a deserted construction site, Jack’s heart lifting at the prospect of finding a pickup truck or even a forklift, but the only motorized equipment left behind had been a small crane, its snow-dusted framework looming over stockpiles of corrugated steel drainage pipe.

They spent the night inside one of the sixty-foot lengths of pipe, Jack sitting by the opening watching the snow come down until the light was gone. Listening to Dee whisper to Cole, the boy crying, mumbling gibberish, delirious with fever. Considering the state of their distressed little nation, he had no intention of falling asleep, but he shut his eyes just for a moment and

WHEN he opened them again, it was light out and the sky bright blue through the spruce trees and a half foot of fresh snow on the ground.

Naomi’s snoring echoed through the pipe.

He looked over at Dee who was awake and still holding Cole.

She said, “His fever broke about an hour ago.”

Had he been standing, the relief would have knocked Jack over.

“Did you even sleep?” he asked.

She shook her head. “But I can feel it coming now.”

Jack looked outside, snow glittering in the early sunlight. “I’m going to have a look around.”

“Food today,” she said.

“What?”

“One way or another, we have to find some food. Today. It’ll have been five days tonight since we last ate, and at some point in the not too distant, we won’t have the strength to keep moving. Our bodies just cannot continue to perform like this.”

He looked past Dee toward his daughter, sleeping in the shadows. “Na’s okay?”

“She’s okay.”

“You?”

Dee broke a smile. “I’ve lost probably twenty, twenty-five pounds these last three weeks. I can’t stop thinking how hot I’d look in a little bikini.”

Jack crossed the construction site, climbed up onto the track of the crane. The door had been left unlocked and he scoured the cab. Found three balled-up potato chip bags and a paper cup filled a quarter of the way with what appeared to be frozen cola.

He set the cup in the sun and moved back between the rows of stacked pipe.

The road was covered in snow.

He went up the hill, inhaling deep shots of freezing, snow-cleansed air. His stomach groaned. It felt good to be up early and walking in the woods with the sun streaming through the trees.

Someone shouted.

Jack stopped in the road, glanced back, but the sound hadn’t come from the construction site.

More voices spilled down through the trees.

He deliberated for three seconds, then started up the road, fighting for traction as he sprinted through powder.

The voices getting louder.

When he came around the next curve, there was a green sign that read “Togwotee Pass, ELEV 9658.”

In the distance, a lodge. Gas station. Tiny cabins off in the spruce trees.

The parking lot was crowded with an array of vehicles—dozen civilian cars and SUVs, three Humvees, two armored personnel carriers, one Stryker, a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, and a big rig with two Red Cross insignias emblazoned on the trailer that framed the words, “Refugee Relief.”

Jack headed toward a group of men in woodland camo BDUs standing by the gas pumps. One of them spotted him, and without a word to the others, shouldered his M16 which had been fitted with a nightscope. The rest of the men saw his reaction, drew their own weapons, and turned to face Jack.

He stopped, staring at five men pointing a variety of firearms in his direction, and the first thing to cross his mind was that it had been nine days since they’d fled the cabin, and how strange it felt to see people who weren’t his family again.

“Where’d you come from?”

Jack bent over to catch his breath, pointed back down the road. The man closest to him was the one who’d spoken. A redhead. Very pale. Freckled. Looked to be his age, his height, but with thirty added pounds of muscle and only a two-day beard. He pointed a Sig Sauer at Jack’s face.

Said, “You’re on foot?”

“Yes.”

“Carrying any weapons?” Jack had to think, realized he’d left the Glock back at the pipe with Dee, and considering the firepower on hand, figured that was probably a good thing.

“No, nothing.”

The man waved a hand toward the others and they lowered their machineguns.

“Where you from?”

Jack straightened. “Albuquerque. Been hiking through the mountains last week and a half. Haven’t had food in five days.”

The man holstered his pistol and smiled, said, “Well, by God, somebody get this man an MRE,” but no one moved.

He had blue eyes the color of a washed-out summer sky and he was squinting a little in the sun. “Good thing you caught us. We were on the

verge of moving out.”

“I’m Jack Colclough.” Jack stepped forward and extended his hand, which the man accepted.

“Good to meet you, Jack. My name. . .” The elbow caught Jack on the chin. He sat down in the snow as the reinforced steel toe of a black leather combat boot slammed into his face. “. . .is not really important.” Jack opened his eyes. He lay on his back, the redhead’s face inches from his own and the blue sky distorted by tears that streamed out of his eyes from his crushed nose. “Who else is with you?”

“No one.”

The man’s hand wrapped around his ring finger and twisted until Jack felt the bone snap and he howled as the man stood on his arm and unsheathed a knife.

When Jack came to, the man was holding his ring finger in front of his face and sliding the gold wedding band up and down the free-range digit.

“Where is the person who put this ring on your finger?”

The pain reached up through Jack’s entire left arm like a molten rod he couldn’t shake free.

The man unholstered his Sig Sauer, pushed the barrel into Jack’s left eye. “Sir, I will put a bullet through your cornea.”

“They’re dead,” Jack said. “You crazy fuckers killed them.”

Dee opened her eyes, the sound of cranking engines having stirred her from sleep. She eased Cole down onto the floor of the pipe and crawled outside.

The sun-glare blinding off the snow.

She called for Jack.

Scanned the construction site but didn’t see him.

Hurried through the snow into the road as other engines roared to life.

They weren’t far—just a short distance through the trees—and she was running up the road now toward a clearing.

She rounded a turn. There was an oasis at the top of the pass. Military vehicles rumbled in the parking lot, and for a moment her heart lightened and she thought they were saved until her eyes fell upon two soldiers a

hundred feet away, dragging a bloody-faced man by his arms toward the open doors of an eighteen-wheeler.

Jack.

She started toward him, got three steps before the mother inside her screamed louder than the wife. Out in the open now. The noise of two dozen engines was deafening and the air was filling with exhaust. The men were pulling her husband up the ramp into the back of the truck while two other soldiers aimed their weapons into the darkness of the semitrailer. She held the Glock, but in the face of all this, it felt like a bad joke. That voice inside her begging to run. Someone was going to see her and chase her into the woods, kill her or take her away, and then her children would be alone out here and she couldn't imagine anything worse than that.

She backpedaled off the road into the woods and crouched down in a thicket of spruce saplings as the Bradley Fighting Vehicle lurched out of the parking lot into the road, leading the convoy down the west side of the pass. Other cars and SUVs fell in behind as Jack's legs disappeared into the trailer. Soon after, the two soldiers emerged and lowered the rear door. Latched it, hopped down onto the pavement, lifted the metal ramp, walked it underneath the bed of the truck. They ran to the Stryker and one of them ducked into the back while the other climbed up onto the roof and manned the 50-cal.

The big rig lumbered out of the parking lot, tailed by the Stryker, and it felt like her heart was being ripped from her chest as she watched the convoy begin to slip away, rolling down the other side of the mountain.

In an instant, it was gone. All she could hear was the transfer truck downshifting on a steep grade. Then the top of the pass stood silent. No wind. No birds cheeping. Just the sun pouring down onto the snow.

Dee leaned over into the ice and came apart.

She staggered back into the road and followed it down the east side of the pass. Her throat raw from crying and she still held clumps of her hair that she'd ripped out. Desperate to do something to fix this but she couldn't. That helplessness felt like loose electricity under her skin—wild and frantic but with no outlet. The urge to put the gun to her own head bordered on irresistible.

She reached the construction site and walked over to the pipe. Her children still slept. She crawled inside and sat with her knees drawn into her chest, trying not to cry again so they might sleep a little longer. Jack was slipping farther and farther away with every passing second, and she could feel the expanding distance and it tore her guts out.

Naomi was stirring. Dee turned and stared into the shadow of the pipe, watched her daughter sit up and rub her eyes.

She looked around.

“Where’s Dad?”

Dee whispered, “Come outside. I don’t want to wake Cole.”

“What’s wrong?”

The tears were starting up in her eyes again. “Just come on.”

When Dee told her daughter what had happened, Naomi cupped her hand to her mouth and ran to a far stack of pipes and crawled into one on the bottom row. Dee stood in the snow with her eyes welling up again, listening to the pipe distort Naomi’s sobbing like some tragic flute.

Cole stared at her, grave as she’d ever seen him, but he didn’t cry. They were sitting on a patch of dry pavement in the road in the warmth of high-altitude sunlight.

“Where did they take him?” the boy asked.

“I don’t know, honey.”

“Why did they?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are they going to kill him?”

The questions came like little stabs of reinforcement, shoring up the horrific reality of it all.

“I don’t know.”

Cole looked back toward the construction site. “When is Naomi going to come out?”

“In a little while. She’s really upset.”

“Are you upset?”

“Yeah, I’m upset.”

“When can we see Daddy again?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, Cole.”

The boy stared at a trickle of snowmelt gliding down the pavement. “This is one of the worst things that ever happened, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” She could tell he was mulling something over, sorting out the ramifications.

“If we don’t find Daddy, does that mean you’re my wife and I get to be in charge of Naomi?”

Dee wiped her face.

“No, sweetheart, it doesn’t mean that.”

In the afternoon, Dee walked over to the pipe where Naomi had holed herself up for hours and crouched down by the opening. Inside, her daughter lay unmoving, and she reached out, touched her ankle.

“Na? You asleep?”

Naomi’s head shook.

“There are some buildings just up the road. I thought we could check them out, see if there’s food. Warm beds to sleep in.”

No movement. No answer.

“You can’t lay here indefinitely, wishing things aren’t the way they are.”

“I know that, Mom. I know that. Can you just give me thirty minutes, please?”

“Okay. But then we have to leave.”

The shadows stretched as they walked through slush to the top of the pass.

The lodge had been vandalized.

The restaurant raided.

Refrigerators contained nothing but rotting vegetables and fruit. Spoiled jars of condiments that she almost considered eating.

Dee had to break glass to gain entry to one of the tiny cabins. They climbed through the windowframe. Just as cold on the inside, but at least there were two bunk beds along the wall.

The kids crawled into bed and Dee unlocked the door and went back outside. Walked down to the road and stood at the crest of the pass. Thirty-five miles away, Grand Teton punctured the bottom curve of the sun and the

nearer peaks were catching alpenglow. The snow and the rock the color of peach skin.

Watched the sun drop, wondering where Jack was in all that darkness.

She closed her eyes, spoke aloud.

“Jack, do you hear me? Wherever you are, whatever’s happening to you in this moment, know that I love you. And I’m with you. Always.”

She’d never said anything with such desperation. Closest she’d ever come to prayer. Wondered if the intensity of what raged inside her could carry the words to him on some secret frequency.

Beneath the stars, she started back toward her children, the snow crunching under her footsteps. A part of her still thinking that when she walked into that little cabin, Jack would be there, her sensory memory still operating on the default of his proximity.

In the total darkness of the cabin, she could hear Cole and Naomi breathing deeply. She pulled off her crumbling shoes and took a bottom bunk—sheeted mattress, no blanket. Hoped her children dreamed of something other than what their life had become.

IN the morning, Naomi had barely the strength to rise out of bed, and the prodding it took rivaled the difficulty Dee had experienced trying to rouse her two months ago on the first school day of the year.

They wandered outside, having slept through most of the morning, and now it was almost warm and the sun was high and there were only patches of snow in the shadows and the forest. They ate as much of it as they could get down.

The pavement was dry. They started down the other side of the pass, Dee cold and more lightheaded than when she donated blood. The spruce trees and the sky seemed to have lost their vibrancy, almost sepia-toned, and the sounds of the forest and their footsteps on the road came muffled.

She wondered if they were dying.

In the midafternoon, Dee glanced up and saw that Naomi was sitting in the road, swaying over the double yellow like windblown sawgrass.

Dee eased down beside her.

“Are we stopping?” Cole asked.

“Yeah, for a minute.”

The boy walked over to the shoulder to investigate a brown sign riddled with buckshot that warned, You Are Now in Grizzly Bear Country.

“I think a rest is a good idea,” Dee said.

“I’m not resting.”

“Then what is this?”

“I’m so hungry and tired and Dad’s probably dead. I just want to die now, too.”

“Don’t say that.”

Naomi turned slowly and stared at her mother. “Don’t you? Be honest.”

“We have to keep going, Na.”

“Why do you say that? We don’t have to do anything. We can stay right here and waste away or you can put us all out of our miseries right now.”

Her eyes flickered at the Glock tucked into Dee’s waistline.

It surprised Dee as much as it did Naomi when she slapped her daughter hard across the face.

Whispered, “You get the fuck up right now, young lady, or I will drag your little ass down this mountain so help me God. I didn’t raise you to quit.”

Dee struggled back onto her feet as Naomi slumped across the road and wept with what little energy she still had.

Dee crying, too. “Come on, Cole, let’s go.”

“What’s wrong with Naomi?”

“She’ll be okay. Just needs a minute.”

“Are we leaving her?”

“No, she’ll be right along.”

They had covered barely a mile by evening when they left the road for a boulder-strewn meadow. No snow or running water anywhere. As the thirst stalked them, all Dee could think about was all the snow they’d passed up earlier in the day, how she should have taken a container from the restaurant at the pass, packed it with ice for later.

The ground was soft and moist from the recent snowfall, and they curled up on the far side of a boulder, hidden from the road, everyone asleep before the stars came out.

* * * * *

DEE woke with the sun in her face and a dehydration headache. Her children slept and she let them go on sleeping. Lethargic and hopeless. Nothing more unappealing than rising from the cool soft grass to trudge on down that road.

She lay there, gliding in and out of consciousness, always returning to the question—where are you? And—are you? It seemed impossible that he could be gone and she not know. Not feel it in the pit of her soul.

She lay facing her daughter, Naomi's eyes half open, blades of dead-yellow grass trembling between them that Dee had been giving serious thought to eating.

"I hurt everywhere," Naomi said.

"I know."

"Are we dying, Mom?"

How to answer such a question.

"We're in rough shape, baby."

"Is it going to hurt a lot worse than this? Toward the end, I mean."

"I don't know."

"How much longer?"

"Naomi. I don't know."

Dee had completely lost time, and whether the sun's position in the sky indicated late morning or early afternoon, she couldn't tell. She reached over and put her hand to Cole's back. Confirmed the rise and the fall. The boy slept against the boulder and she could feel the cold radiating from the rock.

When Dee rolled back over toward her daughter, Naomi was sitting up in the grass. Dee thinking her zygomatic bones seemed extraordinarily pronounced, the bones like crescent moons forming the lower range of her hollowed-out eye sockets.

"You hear that?" Naomi said.

Dee did. A sound like sustained thunder. She looked up, said, "It's above us, Na."

A jet, too distant to discern the type, streaked across the sky, its contrail iridescent in the brilliant blue.

Night and freezing cold. Dee lying with her back against the boulder, Cole shivering in her arms. The children slept, but she'd been awake for an hour, fighting black thoughts. She hadn't intended to lie in this meadow all day. Between the weakness and exhaustion, it had just happened. But tomorrow would involve a choice, and knowing they'd only be more exhausted, thirstier, and in greater agony, she was already making excuses for why they shouldn't push on. Basking in the increasingly soothing presence of what lay two feet away in the grass, just within arm's reach.

Naomi shook her awake.

"Mom, get up."

Dee opened her eyes to her daughter silhouetted against the sweep of stars and leaning over her.

"What's wrong, Na?" It hurt to speak, her throat swollen.

"Someone's coming."

"Give me a hand."

She extricated herself from Cole's embrace and grabbed onto Naomi's arm and tugged herself upright.

Sat listening.

At first, nothing. Then she discerned the sound of an engine still a long ways off, had to strain to tell if it was fading away or approaching.

"It's coming toward us, Mom."

Dee used the boulder to pull herself onto her feet. She picked up the Glock, the metal glazed with frost. They walked through the alpine meadow to the shoulder of the road. The double yellow glowing in the starlight, and the noise of the approaching car getting louder, like a wave coming ashore.

Dee's leg muscles burned. The warmth of her hand had melted some of the frost off the Glock, and she used her shirt to wipe the condensation and ice from the steel.

"Go back to the boulder, Na."

"What are you going to do?"

Dee slipped the Glock into a side pocket of her rain jacket. "When you hear me call out, wake Cole and bring him over, but not until. And if it

doesn’t go right, something happens, you hide, and take care of your brother.”

“Mom—”

“We don’t have time. Go.”

Naomi ran back into the meadow and Dee stepped out into the road, searching for the glint of headlights through the trees, but there was nothing save for the noise of the approaching engine.

A shadow blitzed around the corner.

She had intended to lay down on the pavement, but she didn’t have the guts for that now facing a car with no headlights barreling toward her in the dark of night, so she just stood straddling the double yellow line and waving her arms like a madwoman.

Inside of a hundred yards, the RPMs fell off and the glow of brakelights fired the asphalt red and the tires screeched against the pavement, Dee shielding her eyes from the imminent collision but not yielding an inch.

Then the engine idled two feet away from her and the smell of scorched rubber filled the air. She lowered her arm from her face as the driver’s door squeaked open. It was a Jeep Cherokee, dark green or brown—impossible to tell in this light—with four fuel containers strapped to the roof.

“You trying to commit suicide?” the man growled.

Dee took out the Glock, lined it up in the center of his chest. By the glow that emanated from the Jeep’s interior lights, she could see that he was older—short brown hair on top, a great white beard, salt and pepper mustache that struggled to merge the two. He held something in his left hand.

“Drop it,” she said.

When he hesitated, she sighted up his face, and something in her eyes must have persuaded him, because a gun clattered onto the pavement.

“You’re ambushing me?”

Dee shouted for the kids, heard them come running in the dark.

“Grab the top of the door,” Dee said.

He complied as Naomi and Cole hustled across the road.

On the door below the window, Dee noticed a National Park Service emblem.

“Do you see him, Cole?” Dee said as he sidled up beside her.

“Yes.”

She wouldn’t take her eyes off the man.

“Does he have any light around his head?”

“Lady, what are you—”

“Be quiet.”

“No, Mom.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes.”

Still, she didn’t lower the gun. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Ed.”

“Ed what?”

“Abernathy.”

“What are you doing out here, Mr. Abernathy?”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Girl with the gun gets the answers.”

“I’m trying to survive.”

“We aren’t affected,” she said.

“Neither am I.”

“I know.”

“How exactly do you know?”

“You have water and food?”

He nodded, and it was just a flash of a thought—considering their present state, what the world had become, Dee should kill him right now and take his Jeep and whatever provisions it contained. Not fuck around for one more second, because there was too much at stake. Pulling the trigger, though, was another thing. Maybe he was a good guy, maybe not, but she couldn’t shoot him in cold blood, not even for her children, and maybe because of them.

“There were four of us.” Tears coming. “My husband was taken two days ago by some sort of military unit. Do you know where he might be?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“We haven’t eaten in a week.” Dee felt unstable, eased her right leg back to brace herself against falling. “I don’t want to keep aiming this gun at your face.”

“That’d be all right with me, too.”

She lowered the Glock, slid it into the back of her waistband.

Ed started to bend down. Stopped midway. “I’m picking up my gun, but there’s no threat intended.”

“Okay.”

He ducked behind the door, lifted the revolver off the pavement, and came toward them. Squatted down to Cole’s eye-level.

“I’m Ed,” he said. “What’s your name?”

Cole didn’t reply.

“Tell him your name, buddy.”

“Cole.”

“Do you like Snickers candy bars?”

Dee’s stomach fluttered with a new pang of hunger.

“Yes sir.”

“Well, you’re in luck.”

“Are you a nice person?”

“I am. Are you?”

Cole nodded and Ed pushed against his knees and stood to face Naomi.

“I’m Naomi,” she said.

“Glad to meet you, Naomi.”

Dee extended her hand. “Ed, I’m Dee.”

“Dee, very nice to meet you.”

The upwelling came so fast and unexpectedly that she fell toward Ed and wrapped her arms around his neck. Sobbing. Felt him patting her back, couldn’t pick out the words, but the deep tone of his voice which seemed to move through her like thunder was the closest she’d come to comfort in days.

Ed pulled the Cherokee into the meadow and got out and popped the hatch. Dee and the kids gathered around as he rifled through a banker’s box of packaged food. Three more plastic gas containers crowded the backseats, numerous jugs of water on the floorboards.

Dee sat in the back with Naomi and Cole, her fingers over-anxious and shaking as she ripped open Cole’s wrapper. At the smell of chocolate and peanuts, her hunger swelled into an ache.

They had two candy bars each and several apples, shared a gallon of water from a glass jug. So ravenous it felt less like eating and drinking, more like finally breathing again after being held underwater. When they’d finished, it was all Dee could do not to beg for more, but from the look of things, Ed was light on provisions.

“Where you coming from?” she asked.

He sat in the grass near the rear bumper, just inside the field of illumination thrown from the Jeep’s rear dome light. “Arches in Utah.”

“You a park ranger?”

“Yep.”

“We left Albuquerque. . .I don’t know, three weeks ago, I guess? What day it is.”

“Friday. Well, early Saturday now.”

“We were trying to get to Canada. Heard there were refugee camps across the border.”

“I heard the same.”

“Have you run into much trouble?”

He shook his head. “I left three days ago. Been traveling mainly at night, and in fact, I actually need to keep moving.”

He rose to his feet. Dee noticed he wore green pants and a long-sleeved, gray button-up, wondered if this was his ranger uniform.

She said, “Would you let us come with you?”

“I can’t fit you all inside.”

“Then take my children.”

“Mom, no.”

“Shut up, Na. Would you? Please?”

Ed took out his revolver.

“I need you out of my Jeep right now. I’ve given you some of my food, my water. I’ll even leave a jug with you, but I cannot take you.”

Dee stared down at her filthy, stinking shoes.

“We’ll die out here.”

“And we may all die if you come with me. Now get out of there. I have to go.”

Dee stood watching the Jeep move across the meadow and into the road, heard the engine rev, saw its taillights wink out, listening as it sped away from them into the darkness.

Naomi was crying. “You should’ve shot him, Mom. You had him back there with his gun on the ground and you just let him—”

“He’s not a bad man, Na.”

“We’re going to die now.”

“He wasn’t trying to hurt us. You want to live in a world where we have to kill innocent people to survive? I won’t do that. Not even for you and Cole. There’s things worse than dying, and for me, that’s one of them.”

Cole said, “Listen.”

An engine was approaching. The shadow of that Jeep reappeared and shot out a triangle of light as it entered the meadow.

The engine cut off.

Ed climbed out.

“I’m not happy about this,” he said, walking around to the back, popping the hatch. “Not one goddamn bit. So don’t say anything, for God’s sake don’t thank me. Just get over here and help me make some room.”

Ed loaded what would fit into the cargo area and made just enough room for Naomi and Cole in the backseat. Dee climbed in up front, buckled herself in, and Ed cranked the engine. Heat rushed out of the vents. The digital clock read 2:59 a.m. Ed put the car into gear and eased across the meadow, over the shoulder, back onto the road.

Turned on the stereo as he accelerated.

Dirty blues blasting from the speakers: “She’s a kindhearted woman, she studies evil all the time/She’s a kindhearted woman, she studies evil all the time/You well’s to kill me, as to have it on your mind.”

Dee leaned against the window, watched the trees rush by. Felt so strange to be moving this fast again, the pavement streaming under the tires. The road snaked down through the spruce forest on a steep descent from the pass and her ears kept popping and clogging, the world loud, then muffled, then loud again when she swallowed. With the moon full and high, it struck the road like sunlight and made shadows of the trees. The view to the west was long, and through the windshield she could see the massive skyline of the Tetons.

Dee glanced back between the front seats—Cole and Naomi sleeping sprawled across each other. She reached over, touched Ed’s shoulder.

“You saved our lives.”

“What’d I say about thanking me?”

“I’m not thanking you, just stating a fact.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to, that’s the thing. I’m a supremely selfish fuck.”

Dee tilted her seat back. “Let me know if you want me to drive.”

He grunted, his hands tapping time to the blues, Dee wondering if he’d have sung along if they weren’t in the car with him.

“You can sing if you want,” she said. “Won’t bother us.”

“Might want to be more careful about what you offer in the future,” he said, and started to sing.

His voice was awful.

She dozed against the window, dipping in and out of dream fragments that she couldn’t quite commit herself to before settling finally into a hard and dreamless sleep.

Next time she woke, it was 5:02 a.m.

Still dark out the windows except where the faintest purple had begun to tint the eastern sky. Naomi and Cole slept. The music had stopped.

“Want me to drive for a bit so you can sleep?”

“No, I was going to stop a few miles ahead anyway. Get us off the road for the daylight hours.”

THE lodge towered like a mountain against the predawn sky. They pulled under the front portico. The kids were stirring, woken by the cessation of movement. Ed turned off the engine and stepped out and opened the back hatch. Took a flashlight from one of the supply boxes.

The red double doors stood ajar and they pushed through them.

Ed flicked on the flashlight.

“Anybody here?” His voice echoed through the immense lobby as the beam of his light passed across the hearth and moved up seven stories of framework supported by a forest of burnished tree trunks.

No response.

“Ever been here?” Ed asked.

“Once,” Dee said.

They climbed the stairs to a row of rooms that overlooked the upper porch. Dee and the kids took one with two queen beds. The walls were cedar-paneled. A cast-iron radiator occupied the space beneath the window, and they didn’t need a flashlight anymore with dawn fading up through the dormer.

Ed said, “I sort of feel like one of us should keep watch. Case someone comes.”

“You drove all night,” Dee said. “I’ll do it.”

“Five or six hours, I’ll be good as new. Wake me at noon.”

Dee strolled the corridors in near darkness. The silence of the place imposing. She’d been here before with Jack. Sixteen years ago. A summer day, the lobby bustling and filled with light. They were passing through on a move from Montana to New Mexico, Jack having just been hired by UNM, Dee en route to begin a residency at the university hospital. They’d only stopped for a few hours to have lunch in the dining room, but she still recalled the feel of that day, had never lost it—a lightness in her being and with the two of them married just four months, the sense that they were really beginning a life, that everything lay open and accessible before them.

She walked down to the lobby and went outside, following the paved path to the observation point. The day had dawned clear. Across the basin, a herd of elk grazed the edge of a lodgepole pine forest still recovering from a recent fire and interspersed with dead gray trees.

After a while, a column of water launched out of the earth, steaming in the cold. There had been five hundred tourists here the last time Dee had watched it blow. She listened to the superheated water rain down on the mineralized field, a light wind in her face, the mist lukewarm by the time it reached her.

In the early afternoon, she and Ed made the climb to the widow’s walk, stood on top of the lodge looking out over the basin and the hills, no sound but the flags flapping on the grounds below. Seemed like if she stared hard and long and far enough, she might catch a glimpse of him somewhere out there.

“You’re missing your husband.”

Wiped her eyes. “Did you leave anyone behind when you left Arches?”

Ed shook his head.

“That must make things a little easier. Only having to worry about yourself, I mean.”

“I was married once. I’ve been thinking about her. You know, wondering.”

“Any kids?”

“Haven’t been in touch with them in a long time.” He looked at her as if he might offer some further explanation, then moved on to something else instead. “I’m concerned the Canadian border is going to be tough to cross. I’ve been considering other possibilities.”

“Like what?”

“We’re only a few hours south of Bozeman. That’s the nearest airport. Maybe we get our hands on a plane.”

“You’re a pilot?”

“Used to fly commercial jets.”

“How long since you’ve been in a cockpit?”

“You really want to know?”

“Can you still fly? I mean, doesn’t the technology change?”

“We’d just be looking for a twin-prop. Nothing too complicated. We could be in Canada in under two hours.”

Dee slept through the rest of the afternoon, and in the evening, she took Naomi and Cole down to the observation point. When it finally blew, the sunlight shot horizontally through the scalding mist and turned the water into fire.

Ed gassed up the Jeep and added a few quarts of oil, employed Cole to clean the dust and grime off the windows. They set out with the moon high enough to obviate the need for headlights, speeding north through the park to the blues of Muddy Waters.

An hour and a half brought them to the Montana border. They roared across and up through the isolated, nothing towns of Gardiner, Miner, and Emigrant, all vacated, all long-since and so thoroughly burned there wasn’t even the temptation to stop and search for food.

A little before midnight, Ed pulled over onto the shoulder.

“We’re close to Bozeman,” he said, “but if we stay on this road, we’re going to have to get on the interstate.” He opened the glove compartment, pulled out a map, and unfolded it across the steering wheel.

Dee leaned over and touched a light gray line that branched off from the bold one denoting the highway they'd been driving all night.

"Here?" she said.

"Yeah, that's the one we need to find. See how it cuts right across? Once we hit it, we're only twenty miles from the Bozeman airfield."

Dee spotted it as they raced past and Ed turned around in the empty highway and headed back. It was an unmarked dirt road that exploited the Jeep's decrepit shocks, rocking them along for several miles on a gentle climb through pine forest. Just dark enough when passing through the corridors of trees to persuade Ed to punch on the headlights.

"Could we actually fly out tonight?" Dee said.

"Assuming we find a plane with sufficient fuel, I'll probably want to wait until first light. Really don't want my first flight in over two decades to be by instrumentation."

"Can I help fly?" Cole asked.

"Absolutely, copilot."

Dee stared out the window at the open field they moved across, thinking how flying out of all this madness, of finally getting her kids someplace safe, felt so far beyond the realm of possibility she couldn't even imagine it happening.

Ed slammed the brake.

She shot forward, painfully restrained by the seatbelt.

Looked up when she'd recoiled back into the leather seat, her first thought her children who were picking themselves up out of the backseat floorboards, and her second the numerous points of light that were moving toward the Jeep.

"Back up, Ed. Back up right—"

The windshield splintered and something warm sprayed the side of Dee's face as Ed fell into the steering wheel, the horn blaring, other rounds piercing the glass, the night filling with gunshots. Dee unbuckled her seatbelt and shoved the gearshift into park and crawled over the console into the backseat. Sprawled herself on top of Naomi and Cole as bullets struck the car.

"Is he dead?" Naomi asked.

"Yes."

The firing stopped.

“Either of you hit?”

“No.”

“Make it stop,” Cole cried.

“Are you hit, Cole?”

He shook his head.

Footsteps approached the Jeep, and in the illumination of an oncoming flashlight, Dee could see clear liquid sheeting down the glass of the rear passenger window.

“We have to get out of the car,” she whispered.

Already her eyes were burning, the fumes getting stronger.

“They’ll shoot us if we get out,” Naomi said.

“They’ll burn us alive if we stay in. They’ve shot some of the plastic gas cans on top of the Jeep.”

Dee opened the door and tumbled out. The glare of the flashlights maxed her retinas and she could see little of who was there nor determine their number amid the afterimages that pulsed purple in the dark.

“Stop right there.” A man’s voice. Dee stood and raised her hands.

“Please. I have two children with me. Naomi, Cole, get out.” She felt one of them, probably Cole, glom onto her right arm.

“They’re like me,” Cole said.

“What are you talking about?”

“They have light around their head. All of them.”

“Get back in your car,” the man said, close enough now for Dee to get a decent look—three-day beard, dark navy trousers and parka, aiming an automatic weapon at her face.

He motioned toward the car with the machinegun as others emerged out of the dark behind him.

Dee considered the Glock pushed down the back of her pants. Suicide.

“Bill, check the driver.”

A short, stocky soldier put a light through Ed’s window.

“Gone to be with the Lord, boss.”

“Got your Zippo on you, you chain-smoking motherfucker?”

“Yeah.”

“Particularly attached to it?”

“It was my older brother’s.”

“Cough that shit up.”

“Fuck, Max.”

The lightbeam glimmered off the steel as the soldier chucked his lighter to the man who held Dee and her children at gunpoint, Max catching it with his left hand, never letting the AR-15 waver in his right.

“What are you doing with them, little man?”

“Do not speak to my son.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked.

“You know exactly what I mean. Don’t you want to come with us?”

“Why don’t you leave us alone? We aren’t doing anything to you.”

Max looked up at Dee with unfiltered hatred. “Get back in the car.”

“No.”

“Get in the car or I’ll shoot you and your children in the knees and put you in there myself. You can roast healthy or you can roast with shattered kneecaps. It makes not a fucking bit of difference to me so long as I get to watch you burn.”

Dee said, “What did we ever. . .”

Max aimed the AR-15 at her left knee.

Split second choice. Reach for the Glock or speak one last time to your children.

“I love you, Naomi. I love you, Cole. No one and nothing can take that away.”

“I can,” Max said.

She drew her kids into her, Naomi quaking and crying, but she didn’t allow herself to avert her eyes from the man who was going to murder them. She stared Max down, wondering would he think of them years from now on his deathbed in a moment of clarity and regret, wondering if her eyes would always haunt him, but she doubted it as he returned the stare, a malevolent smile curling his lips, Dee’s heart in her throat.

The slug mostly decapitated Bill.

A shotgun thundered out of the woods, Max spinning toward the gunfire, several of his men falling, flashlights hitting the ground, muzzleflames spitting out of the machineguns. Dee jerked Naomi and Cole to the ground and dragged them crawling away from the Jeep toward the other side of the road, where they rolled into a ditch.

Smell of moist, rich earth. The gunfire intensifying, bullets striking the trees behind them, Dee pushing Naomi's and Cole's heads down, pulling Cole into her chest and speaking into his ear over the shattering noise of the firefight, "I'm right here, I've got you." She couldn't hear him crying but she could feel his body shaking.

After what seemed ages, the flurry of gunfire dissipated.

They lay in the dark, Dee staring into a wall of dirt.

Someone yelled, "Fall back."

Footsteps crunched through the leaves—someone retreating into the woods.

A man groaned nearby, begging for help.

Three reports from a handgun.

An AR-15 answered.

The exchange went on for several minutes, and it struck Dee that the gunfire sounded like the communication of terrible birds. She was tempted to climb out of the ditch and have a look, but she couldn't bring herself to move.

After a while, the shooting stopped altogether.

Footfalls echoed through the forest.

The man nearby pleaded to God.

Someone said, "Jim, right there."

A machinegun ripped up the silence.

Four shotgun blasts roared back.

Footsteps moved closer to the ditch.

"Sure we got all of them?"

A woman answered, "Yeah, there were nine. I count one, two, three, four, five six. . ." She laughed. "Where do you think you're going?" A single handgun report rang out. "And this one's still hanging in there, too."

"No, Liz."

"Why?"

"Please, it hurts so bad."

"You're breaking my fucking heart. Why can't I end this piece of shit?"

"Mathias wanted one alive."

"'Kay. Driver's dead, but I saw three others get out. Woman, couple of kids."

“They crawled into the woods when the shooting started. May be gone by now.”

Footsteps moved across the dirt road and stopped at the edge of the ditch.

The woman yelled into the woods, “Woman and two kids? You out there? We’re the good guys, and the bad guys are dead or wishing they were.”

Dee didn’t move, not wanting to startle anyone, just said softly, “We’re right here. Underneath you.”

The woman knelt down. “Anyone hurt?”

“No.” Dee pushed herself out of the dirt and sat up. “Thank you. They were going to burn us.”

“You’re safe now.” The woman reached out, took hold of Dee’s hand. “I’m Liz.”

“Dee.”

“And who’s this?”

“This is Cole, and this is Naomi.”

“Hi, Cole. Hi, Naomi.”

Liz wore a dark, one-piece jumpsuit. Long black hair drawn back into a ponytail under her black beanie. Even squatting down, Dee could see that she was tall and fit, possessing a hard, wiry strength evident in the angular tapering of her jawline.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Liz said. “You want to come with us?”

“Where to?”

Liz smiled. “It’s not far.”

Dee held Cole’s and Naomi’s hands as they followed Liz and the others back through the woods, guided by flashlights. Two of their party lagged behind, dragging the injured soldier who they could hear groaning some distance back through the trees, Dee feeling the ache, despite everything, to attend to him. A deep-rooted hardwiring from her medical training that she wondered if she would ever lose.

A quarter mile into the woods, they stopped.

Someone said, “We’re at the perimeter.”

A voice squeaked back over a radio. “You’re clear.”

“We picked up a woman and two children. I’m going to have Liz put them in number fourteen. Have someone bring some food and water over. New clothes, too.”

“Copy that.”

Dee noticed light glinting off coils of razorwire straight ahead.

One of the men stepped on the wire where it sagged, made an opening for everyone to crawl through. They went on, and after another fifty feet, finally emerged from the woods. Under the moonlight, Dee could see a number of smaller buildings scattered through the clearing, satellites of a large, arched steel building.

Liz fell back and walked with them.

“You must be exhausted,” she said. “We’re going to put you up in a cabin. I want you to know that you’re safe here. See those?” She pointed toward opposing ends of the clearing where twenty-foot log towers stood near the edge of the forest. “There’s a heavily-armed man in each wearing night vision goggles. They’ll be watching over the clearing while you sleep.”

They were moving toward a grouping of small cabins now.

“I don’t understand. What is this place?” Dee asked.

“It’s our home.”

The cabin was clean and smaller than the shacks at the top of Togwotee Pass. There were two beds and a chair pushed under a desk and a chest of drawers. Sink and shower.

“We cut the generators off at night,” Liz said. She opened the top drawer and took out several candles and a box of matches. In a minute, candlelight warmed the room.

She came over to Dee and inspected her face.

“You’re covered in blood. I’ll make sure they bring a basin of water so you can clean up. The showers won’t run hot until morning.”

“Thank you, Liz.”

“I’ll leave you guys now. Food should be here soon.”

Dee stripped to her bra and panties, suddenly aware of how terrible she smelled. She bent down and dipped her face into the basin of water and wiped off the dried blood with a washcloth. Scrubbed her armpits, did a cursory cleaning of her arms and legs, but her hair still felt stringy and greasy.

Cole slept. Dee and Naomi sat on the other bed devouring the food that had been brought for them—a tray of fruit and cheese and crackers that tasted better than anything they'd ever eaten.

Dee stowed the Glock under the mattress. They crawled under the covers and it took some time before their body heat warmed the air between the mattress and the sheet, Dee spooning her daughter, sleep right around the corner.

Naomi whispered, "Do you think Dad's dead?"

Felt like someone driving a spike through the ulcer in Dee's stomach.

Tomorrow would be four days without him.

"I don't know, Na."

"Well, does it feel to you like he is?"

"I don't know, baby. I can't even think about it. Please just let me sleep."

SHE'D just fallen asleep when the windows filled with dawnlight. Dee rose, pulled the curtains, climbed back into bed. Tried to sleep but her thoughts came frenetic and unstoppable. She got up again and went to the window and peered through the split in the curtain. A few people were out already, the long grass blanched with frost, and in daylight, the meadow appeared cluttered—two dozen one-room cabins like the one they occupied, three larger A-frames, the central steel building, and a number of semi-trailers standing along the edge of the woods, rusted all to hell and cemented with pine needles as if it had been centuries since their abandonment. Distant mountains peeked above the pine trees, and Dee sat on the surface of the desk watching the light color them in, and she was still sitting there two and a half hours later when the woman named Liz walked up the path to their cabin.

The main building was fifty feet wide, twice as long, and windowless. Bare lightbulbs dangled from the trusses and the amalgamation of voices caused a hollow, metallic resonance off the corrugated steel. Cheap folding tables had been pushed against the walls, leaving a wide row down the middle. Just inside the entrance, a chalkboard stand displayed: Hash Browns with Bacon & Cheese Omelet.

Liz led them to an empty table.

“We haven’t been able to get into town for several weeks, so we’ve been dipping into our MRE stash.”

“What’s an MRE?” Cole asked.

“Stands for Meal, Ready-to-Eat. It’s an army ration. We bought two truckloads last year.”

Dee could feel the stares coming from every direction, tried to focus on the blemishes in the plastic tabletop, ignoring that twinge in her gut like the first day of junior high and the minefield of the cafeteria.

A teenage girl appeared at the end of the table holding a basket filled with small, brown packages, plastic silverware, and a stack of tin bowls.

“Welcome,” she said.

The man who spoke after breakfast was slight and smoothshaven with thinning blond hair on the brink of turning white. He wore jeans and a plaid shirt and a black down vest. He stood on a table at the back of the mess hall so everyone could see him.

“No doubt you all heard the gunshots late last night. I’m happy to report that Liz and Mike and their team managed to take out the soldiers’ checkpoint at the road.”

Raucous applause broke out.

Someone yelled, “Freemen.”

Silence returned when he lifted his hand.

“No casualties on our end, and the really good news is that we took one alive. Badly wounded, but alive. Liz and Mike also managed to save three lives during the ambush.” He pointed back toward the entrance. “Dee, would you and your children stand up please.”

Dee took Cole’s hand and poked Naomi and they all rose.

“Thank you,” Dee said. She glanced down at Liz. “To you. To Mike, wherever you are, and all of the others who came. My children and I would be dead right now if it wasn’t for you. There’s not a doubt in my mind.”

“Why don’t you come on up here,” the man said.

Dee stepped around her chair and walked down the aisle. When she arrived at the table the man was standing upon, he reached down and opened his hand and pulled her up with him. Slipped his arm around her waist, put his lips to her ear, whispered, “Dee, I’m Mathias Canner. Introduce yourself. Tell us about your journey.”

She looked out over the crowd—fifty, maybe sixty faces staring back at her.

Managed a weak smile.

“I’m Dee,” she said. “Dee Colclough.”

Someone in the back yelled, “Can’t hear you.”

Later, she walked with Mathias. It was midmorning and the sun had cleared the forest wall. The dewy grass drying out. He showed her the well, the greenhouse and chicken coop, the gardens which had already been winterkilled.

“I bought this ninety-acre parcel twelve years ago,” he said. “Sold my business and moved out with several friends from Boise. Something, isn’t it?”

“What exactly brought you out here?”

“Wanting to live as a free man.”

“You weren’t free before?”

He waved to the bearded man up in the guard tower holding a sniper rifle. “Morning, Roger.”

“Morning.”

“All quiet?”

“All quiet.”

As Mathias led Dee into the trees, his right hand unsnapped the holster for the huge revolver at his side.

“Roger came to me nine years ago. He was an investment banker pulling down three mil a year and utterly miserable. The electrified razorwire starts fifty feet in and runs through the woods around the entire clearing. We’ve installed motion detectors at key points and six men walk the perimeter day and night. If I learn that you’re a spy or that you’ve lied to me in any way, I’ll kill your children in front of you, wait a day, and then kill you.”

He stopped and stared at her.

She could hear the hum of the fence behind them, and standing in a patch of light, see the color in his eyes—brown with sunlit flecks of green. Her kneecaps trembled, and for a moment, she thought she might have to sit down.

“I’m just a doctor from Albuquerque,” she said. “Trying to keep my kids safe. Everything I’ve told you is true.”

They walked again.

“Ten days ago, we sent someone out on reconnaissance.”

“They haven’t come back?”

He shook his head. “What’s it like out there?”

“A nightmare. You can’t tell who’s affected until they try to kill you.”

“They aren’t just military?”

“No. They group together and travel in convoys. They recognize the unaffected on sight. I couldn’t tell you how many towns we passed through that have been burned to the ground.”

“We had to put five of our own down a few weeks ago. They killed three people before we stopped them. Is it a virus? Do you know what’s causing it?”

“No,” she said. “It all imploded so fast.”

They crossed over a road—just the faintest depression of tire tracks in the leaves.

“You have vehicles?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She caught movement up ahead—one of the guards cruising the perimeter.

“Two of our women are pregnant. We don’t have a doctor.”

“I’d be happy to see them.”

They veered back out of the woods into the clearing, moved past a group of children standing in the grass, each with their own easel.

“We’re really proud of our school here,” he said. “Naomi and Cole are welcome to attend, of course.”

In the afternoon, Dee examined two women with child and checked in on a fifteen-year-old boy with a low-grade fever and rackety cough, just relieved to engage her mind in her old life, if only for a short while.

“I don’t like this place,” Naomi said. “These people creep me out.”

Dee lay in bed in their cabin under the covers with Cole and Naomi, the boy already asleep.

“Would you agree it’s an improvement on starving to death?”

“I guess.”

Cold air slipped in through the windowframe, just a hint of color in the sky and the tops of the spruce trees profiled against it.

“We staying?” Naomi asked.

“For a few days at least. Get our strength up.”

“Is this like, a militia?”

“I think it might be.”

“So they probably believe all kinds of crazy shit about the government and black people?”

“I don’t know, haven’t asked them, don’t plan to.”

“I’d rather just go to Canada.”

“Could we take it a day at a time for now? At least while they’re still feeding us?”

The knock came in the middle of the night.

Dee stirred from sleep and sat upright and looked around. Not a single source of manmade light, and because she’d extinguished the candle before settling into bed, the room was absolutely dark. She couldn’t recall the layout of her surroundings or even where she was until Mathias Canner’s voice passed through the door.

“Dee. Get up.”

She climbed over Cole, her bare feet touching the freezing floorboards.

Moved through pure darkness toward Canner’s voice.

No locks on the inside of the door, which she pulled open by the wooden handle.

“Sorry to wake you,” Mathias said through the inch of open space between the doorframe and the door. “But you’re a doctor.” He grinned, and in the starlight, she noticed a dark smear across the left side of his face. “Sometimes you get paged in the wee hours, right?”

“Not often. I have a general practice.”

“Well, terribly sorry to inconvenience you, but we require the services of an MD.”

“What happened?”

“Just get dressed. I’ll be waiting right here.”

She followed him through the field, the stars blazing over them in the moonless dark. Arrived at the edge of the woods at a small concrete

building half-buried in the ground, which at first blush, reminded Dee of a storm cellar.

Mathias led her down a set of stairs to a steel door.

She hesitated on the last step. “What are we doing?”

“You’ll see.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Do you think the food and the water and the shelter we’re providing to you and your children have no cost?” He pushed open the door and a waft of blood and shit and scorched tissue washed over Dee and conjured the memory of her ER rotation. She looked away from it and braced herself and looked again.

The man, or what was left of him, lay toppled over on the stone floor, naked and manacled to one of the metal folding chairs from the mess hall. He was unconscious in a puddle of blood that appeared as black as motor oil in the candlelight.

Liz sat in another folding chair looking sweaty and happy. She held an iron rod across her lap, one half-inch wide and wrapped at one end with a bulge of duct tape, the finger-grip indentations clearly visible. A blanket had been spread out on the floor beside Liz and upon it lay knives, a drill, a bucket filled with ice water, and a small blowtorch.

“Why are you doing this to him?” Dee asked and the disgust must have bled through her voice because Liz answered,

“This is the man who was on the verge of burning you and your children before we showed up.”

“I know who he is.”

“We’re collecting information,” Mathias said and closed the door. “Unfortunately, he lost consciousness after Liz hit him a few minutes ago.”

Dee stared at Liz. “Where’d you hit him?”

“Right arm.”

“Would you examine him please, Doctor?” Mathias asked.

Dee approached the man named Max, squatting down at the edge of the pool of his blood which was still creeping, millimeter by millimeter, across the stone. She touched two fingers to his wrist, felt the weak shudder of his radial artery. Inspected the mottled bruise that was expanding imperceptibly over the broken bone beneath his right bicep like a cancerous rainbow—

red, yellow, blue, then ringed with black. His abdomen was hot and swollen around a bullethole in his side which she guessed had nicked his liver.

“She didn’t kill him, did she?” Mathias said.

“Not quite, but she did break the humerus of his right arm. He probably lost consciousness from the pain.” She noticed Max’s legs, fighting back the rise of bile in her throat as she said, “If you burn him anymore he’s going to lose so much fluid he’ll go into shock and die. I mean, he’s going to die of sepsis in the next day or so anyway, no doubt, but keep burning him, and you’ll lose him tonight.”

“Good to know.”

“Was there anything else you needed from me?” Dee asked, staring at this man who would’ve murdered her children and yet still cringing for him.

“Max did happen to mention that Cole is affected.”

Dee looked back over her shoulder. “Is that a joke?”

“Max told us that when you pulled up to the checkpoint and got out, he saw a light around Cole’s head.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“You think?”

“You were torturing him. He’d say anything to—”

“That’s possible. In fact, I hope it’s the case. But just to be sure, Mike’s talking with Cole right now.”

Dee jumped up and started toward the door. As she reached for the handle, something struck her from behind and shoved her up against the cold wall of concrete.

Liz spoke into her ear, “Just settle down, Dee.”

“I’ll fucking kill you if you touch—”

“They’re only talking,” Mathias said.

“You don’t talk to my son without me.” She was trembling with rage.

“Fair enough. Let’s join them.”

She walked between Liz and Mathias, the woman clutching Dee’s left arm in a solid grip that Dee imagined could be crushing if Liz wanted it to be. There was candlelight glowing in the windows of her cabin now, and if she could have broken free she would have run toward it, her heart bumping harder and harder as they approached.

They followed Mathias up the three steps to the door.

He pushed it open, said, “How we doing?”

Dee jerked her arm out of Liz’s grasp and pushed past Mathias into the cabin.

Cole sat on the bed and Mike straddled a chair which he’d spun around in front of the door. Naomi was up, too, sitting against the window, and Dee could see in her daughter’s face a measure of real fear.

She climbed onto the bed, pulled her son into her arms.

“You okay, buddy?”

“Yes.”

“Naomi?”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“Everybody’s fine, Mom,” Mike said, and something in his tone—a note of rehearsed steadiness and authority—and his cleanshaven face and buzzed blond hair reminded her of everything she hated about lawmen.

“You don’t speak to my son without me.”

Mike seemed to disregard this jurisdictional instruction, glancing instead at Mathias.

“Ask the boy about the lights.”

Mathias looked at Cole. “Go ahead, tell me about—”

“Don’t answer him, Cole. You don’t have to say a word to that man.”

“That’s not exactly true, Dee,” Mathias said. “Do you think I’m incapable of arranging a private conversation with your son? You can answer me, Cole. Cole, no, Jesus. . .it’s okay, don’t get upset. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Cole had turned into Dee’s chest, and she could feel his little body shaking, Cole trying not to cry in front of these strange people.

Mike said, “From what the boy told me, there was some feature in the sky several weeks ago.”

“So he’s confirmed what Max said.”

“Yeah, and apparently the people who witnessed this event became affected shortly thereafter.”

“Did you see the lights, Cole?”

Cole wouldn’t look at him.

“Did the boy see it?”

“Says he did, but that his parents and sister didn’t.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” Dee said. “He’s no threat to anyone.”

Mathias stared at Dee. “We stay intentionally out of the loop here. We don’t monitor the news or even the weather. Tell me exactly what this event was.”

Dee kissed the top of Cole’s head and rubbed his back while she spoke. “A massive aurora visible to all of the lower forty-eight, northern Mexico —”

“And you didn’t see it?”

“It wasn’t like the news was going too crazy over it. No more coverage than a large meteor shower. We had wanted to stay up for it, but it happened so late, Jack and I just didn’t manage to drag ourselves out of bed.”

“But your son saw it.”

Her eyes filled up with tears. “Cole slept at a friend’s house and they set their alarm and woke up at three in the morning and watched it.”

Mathias smiled. “You lied to me.”

“I was afraid you’d—”

“You’ve brought someone who’s affected into our community.”

“My son is not affected.”

“So you say. But Cole has admitted to seeing the lights. Max saw the light around his head yesterday night. How exactly is he not affected?”

“I’m his mother. I know my son. He hasn’t changed at all. He isn’t hostile.”

“You’ll understand, me being responsible for the safety of the sixty-seven souls who live in this field, if I don’t just take your word on that.”

“Then we’ll leave,” she said.

“I wish it were that easy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know the location of our compound. You’ve had a tour of our security measures. Do you honestly believe I would allow you to go back out into that war zone with this information?”

“You can’t stop us from leaving if we want to.”

“Dee.” Mathias moved forward, eased down onto the bed. Ran his hand along her shinbone until his fingers closed gently around her ankle. “I wrote the constitution we abide by. I invented our civil and criminal codes of law. I am God here.”

He released her leg and glanced over his shoulder at Mike.

Back to Dee.

“I think at this point, it would benefit all concerned for you and I to step outside and have a private conversation.”

“You go to hell.”

He lowered his voice. “Think about your children, Dee.” Whispering now: “If you get upset, it’s only going to make them more afraid.”

Mike’s radio squeaked.

“Mike, come back.”

Mike unclipped the radio from his belt and lifted the receiver to his mouth.

“Can this wait, Bruce? Little tied up at the moment.”

“The sensors are returning multiple echoes.”

“Look, I don’t mean to be critical, since I know this is a new assignment for you, but sometimes a herd of elk or deer will pass through.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“How do you know?”

“We’ve had a current interruption in the razorwire.”

“You’re telling me someone’s cut through?”

“I think so, because now. . .” His voice trailed off.

Mike said, “Bruce, repeat. You broke up.”

“I’m wearing night vision goggles and staring south toward the woods. . .definitely picking up a lot of movement in the trees.”

“How many?”

“Can’t tell.”

“Soldiers?”

“I don’t know. They’re crawling along the ground.”

Mathias stood and grabbed the radio from Mike. “Bruce, we’re coming. Put the word out on channel eight and get people into position right now. Just like we’ve drilled. If you get a shot, start taking them out.”

“Copy that.”

Mathias handed the radio back to Mike and started for the door. “Liz, stand guard outside. If they try to leave, shoot them.”

Dee brought the lit candle over from the dresser and down with her and Cole onto the floor.

“Come on Naomi, I don’t want you near the window.”

Her daughter climbed off the bed, said, “We’re going to be killed if we stay in here.”

Dee crawled over to Naomi’s bed and lifted the mattress.

“Still there?” Naomi whispered.

“Yeah.”

Dee took the gun and eased the mattress back down. She ejected the magazine—still fully loaded—then coughed to cover the metallic clatter as she popped the magazine home and jacked a round.

“Both of you, get dressed quickly,” she whispered. “Put on every piece of clothing they gave you.” Dee went to the closet and tugged the three black parkas off the hangers, handed Naomi and Cole theirs, slid into hers.

Then she knelt between them, Cole struggling with the laces of the hiking boots they’d given him which were a size too big.

“Take Cole over there and crouch down with him behind the mattress until I come back for you.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Two minutes tops.”

Dee approached the door, tried to steady the Glock in her hand.

Glanced back at her children hiding behind the bed, could see only a bit of Naomi’s hair.

She spoke through the door, “Liz? You out there?”

No answer.

Dee slid the Glock into the front pocket of her parka and pulled the door open.

Whispered, “Liz?”

The woman squatted ten feet away, watching the far woods with her back to the door. Dee would have shot her then but she had no faith in her aim.

“Liz?”

The woman looked back. “He told you to stay inside.”

“I need to talk to you.”

Liz stood and started back toward the cabin. A machinepistol dangled from a strap around her neck. Her right hand held it trained on Dee. She drew in deep lungfuls of air though it wasn’t sufficient oxygen to fuel the raging pump of her heart.

Liz stopped at the foot of the steps, two feet below her. “What?”

Dee breathless, lightheaded.

“Isn’t there a safer place you can put us?”

“Mathias wants you here, so you stay here. Now go back inside or I’ll fuck you up a little.”

Dee wasn’t sure if Liz would even notice in the starlight, but she suddenly diverted her eyes toward the woods, let her brow scrunch into a subtle furrow. In the time it took Liz to glance back at whatever she thought Dee had seen, Dee drew the Glock from the parka pocket, had it waiting when Liz looked back, aimed down at her face.

Liz’s eyes went wide and she said, “Cunt.”

Dee pulled the trigger.

Liz dropped like she’d been poured out of a glass. Dee stood frozen, staring down at her, awestruck. How short the distance from life and thought to a sprawled shell in the grass. Knew she could have stood there all night trying to wrap her head around it and been no closer at sunrise. No closer forty years from now, or whenever the end of her days might come.

A spark flared across the field in the trees, the report right on its heels. Other muzzleflashes erupting in the forest like lightning bugs and the night filling with gunshots and men yelling.

She hurried back into the cabin, found her children still hiding behind the bed just like she’d told them.

“Time to leave, guys.”

Movement everywhere—shadows running through the dark and voices broken by sporadic shots. As she led her children around the side of the cabin, a distant burst of machinegun fire shredded the front door.

“Stay with me,” she said, grabbing Cole’s hand and pulling him toward the woods. Naomi ran alongside them. Fifty yards to cover and they were passing people in pajamas who’d just stumbled groggy-eyed out of their shacks, some loading rifles or shotguns.

They reached the woods and Dee dragged Naomi and Cole down into the leaves.

From where she lay, it looked like chaos.

Clusters of gunfire blazing back and forth.

Muzzleflashes in the guard towers.

No apparent order.

Just people trying to kill each other and not be killed themselves.

“You guys ready?”

“Where are we going?” Naomi asked.

Dee stood. “Just come on.” She put the Glock in her parka. “Give me your hands.”

They jogged through the woods.

Somewhere in the clearing, a woman screamed.

“Why did they just yell like that?” Cole asked.

“It doesn’t matter. We have to keep running.”

They worked their way through the trees and around the clearing as the firefight intensified.

A hail of bullets eviscerated a spruce tree three steps ahead.

Dee forced her children to the ground and lay on top of them.

“Anybody hit?”

“No.”

“No.”

“There’s a hole just ahead. Crawl into it. Go. Now.”

They scrabbled the last few feet through the leaves and then rolled down an embankment. With starlight barely straggling through the crowns of the trees, it was almost pitch-black in their hole, which was really more of a depression, two feet below the forest floor and just spacious enough to accommodate the three of them. Dee sweated under her clothes from the exertion, but as her heart began to slow, she knew the chill would come. She pulled her children into her and shoveled as many leaves as she could on top of them.

“We have to be quiet now,” she said.

“For how long?” Cole asked.

“Until the shooting stops.”

It went on all night, broken occasionally by spates of silence. Sometimes, there were footfalls in the leaves nearby, and once Dee glimpsed two shadows run past the edge of their depression.

Just before dawn, the shooting stopped. After a while, a chorus of weeping and pleading started up, rising toward a crescendo that was promptly smothered under twenty-five shots that rang out in tandem from what sounded like a pair of small-caliber handguns.

BY dawn, an eerie silence had settled over the clearing and the woods. The sky was lightening through the trees, and though her children snored quietly, Dee hadn't slept all night. Carefully, she withdrew her arms from under Cole's and Naomi's necks and turned over in the frosted leaves and crawled up to the lip of the embankment.

Gunsmoke hovered over the clearing like a dirty mist. From ten yards back in the trees, she had a decent view of the soldiers. Counted at least twenty of them milling around in the grass, sometimes squatting down to confirm the dead were really dead.

There were bodies everywhere in the clearing, and over by the mess hall, two dozen or more lay toppled in a row—women and children.

She backed down into the hole.

Naomi stirred. Her eyes opened. Dee brought her finger to her lips.

They didn't venture out of the hole. Kept hidden instead down in the leaves, listening and sometimes watching the soldiers in the clearing. At midday, a commotion pulled Dee back up to the forest floor. She saw Mathias running through the field, chased by a group of soldiers, one of whom stopped, drew a sidearm, and sighted him up.

Mathias fell concurrently with the pistol report, cried out, and amid the fading echoes of the gunshot, Dee could hear the soldiers laughing.

Someone said, "Nice shot, Jed."

She watched them approach, others coming over now. Surrounding Mathias at the back of a little cabin, fifty or sixty yards away.

"What hole did this rat crawl out of?"

"There's a trapdoor in the ground back there, camouflaged with grass."

"Anyone else in there?"

"Just big enough for him."

Mathias was still crying, and someone said, "You're only shot in the ass. Shut the fuck up until we give you something to cry about."

And they did. All afternoon and into the evening, they did. The screams of Mathias blaring through the woods in between bouts of what Dee could only hope was unconsciousness. She didn't trust Cole's curiosity, so she held the boy to her chest and covered his ears herself, part of her dying to

know what was happening out there, figuring her imagination had invented something infinitely worse than the truth. The other part trying to force her thoughts elsewhere—to a memory or a fantasy—but when the raw and blistering screech of human agony filled the clearing, there was no way to avert her mind from it or to keep from attempting to picture what they must be doing to him.

As darkness fell, light flickered off the trees above them and streamers of sweet smoke drifted into the woods. For three minutes, Mathias screamed louder than he had all day, and then at last, went silent.

Cole and Naomi became still, and soon they were both murmuring softly in their sleep. Dee turned over onto her stomach, the stiffness in her joints excruciating after nearly twenty hours in this hole.

She crawled up the embankment and peered out past the trees.

A bonfire raged in the middle of the clearing and some of the men had gathered around it, their faces aglow, while others carried the pieces of the cabin they were using for firewood over to what she now realized was a pyre.

Mathias had been hoisted up in the middle of the blaze. Even from sixty yards away, she could see that the crossbeams which held him were still standing and that in fact her imagination had failed to concoct anything as remotely evil as what they had actually done to the man.

The soldiers' laughter sounded alcohol-infused.

Somewhere out there, a woman wept.

Dee eased back down into the depression and roused her children.

They crept all the way back to the razorwire, which no longer hummed, and followed it through the trees. The fire was roaring now, shooting flames thirty feet high. From Dee's vantage, she could see one of the soldiers running naked through the grass carrying a burning branch, which he delivered onto the front porch of a cabin.

The soldiers hooted their approval, assembling to watch as the flames licked out along the sides and the roof like molten fingers. Then the voices started up from inside.

"Keep running, guys," Dee said, "and don't listen."

She could hear the people beating on the inside of the door and pleading to be let out, the soldiers talking back, taunting them. What welled up inside of Dee nearly drove her out into that clearing. Maybe she'd only kill one or two of them before they stopped her, but God, in this moment, nothing would feel so right.

"Mom, look."

Naomi had stopped just ahead at a break in the fence where the soldiers had come through the night before, the razorwire severed and pushed back.

"Be careful, Na," Dee said, and she lifted Cole in her arms and followed her daughter between the coils of wire.

When they were through, she set Cole down and they all jogged away from the screaming in the clearing.

Naomi was breathless and crying. She stopped, said, "We have to help them."

"Baby, if there was even a slim chance, we would, but there isn't. We'd end up dead, just like them."

"Are they hurting?" Cole asked.

"Yes."

"I can't stand hearing it," Naomi said.

"Come on. We have to keep moving."

In a little while, they came out of the woods onto the road about a hundred yards up from the checkpoint. Dee took the Glock out of her parka and they moved toward the vehicles up ahead.

No light. No movement.

The sound of voices in agony coming through the trees with the distant glow of flames.

A pair of hummers still sat in the road and the dead soldiers, too.

They arrived at Ed's Jeep.

"Tires are still inflated," she said.

Out of the gas cans fastened to the luggage rack, only one had survived the gunfight to hold its contents.

"We taking the Jeep?" Naomi asked.

"If the engine isn't damaged. Why?"

"Ed's still in the driver seat, and he doesn't smell good."

Dee went around the back of the Jeep and stood beside Naomi.

“No, Cole, stay there.”

“Why?”

“You don’t need to see this.”

“What is it?”

“Ed’s dead, Cole. It’s nothing good to see. Just stay right there, please.”

She held her arm over her nose and mouth, could only imagine what the potency might have been in warm temperatures.

Ed had swollen up against the steering column, his head resting on the wheel. Dee grabbed hold of his left arm. Rigor mortis had come and gone, and it bent easily as she heaved Ed out of the car. Finally got him free and he tumbled out of the driver seat onto the dirt road, his legs still caught up in the floorboard.

“Give me a hand here, Na, but don’t look at his face.”

They dragged him the rest of the way out of the car and off the side of the road into the trees. Dee found a couple of extra shirts in the cargo area and she spread them across the driver seat to cover the sticky, rotting blood.

There was no more screaming in the woods.

“It still smells bad,” Naomi said.

“We’ll keep the windows down. This cold air will scour it out.”

They grabbed a few candy bars and packages of crackers from the banker’s box. Cole sat in the front passenger seat so Naomi could stretch out across the back, and Dee climbed in and worked the driver seat forward until her feet reached the pedals. Right away, she could see that driving was going to be impossible. Five bullets had come through the windshield into Ed, and around the puncture holes, each of them had made a circle of fractured glass that destroyed the translucence.

Dee got out and climbed up onto the hood and stomped on the windshield. All she managed to do was punch out a hole in front of the steering wheel where the cracks had weakened the glass.

The engine cranked on the first try. She shifted into gear and turned on the parking lights and eased onto the gas. They crept forward, Dee listening to the engine which rumbled smoothly, no audible sign of damage. The oil and temperature gauges offered no indications of malfunction.

She steered between the hummers and dead soldiers and accelerated down the dirt road, wind blasting through the windshield in a freezing stream. The car reeked of gasoline and decay and the bits of glass she sat

upon cutting through her jeans, but at least they were on their own and moving away from the clearing. In this moment, safe.

Fifteen miles on, the dirt road intersected with an interstate. All lanes, east- and westbound, empty under the stars. She accelerated down the exit ramp, hit eighty after a half mile. At this speed, the rush of air coming through the windshield dried her eyes to the brink of blindness, so she braked down to forty.

Her children slept.

In every direction, no glimmer of habitation.

The milemarkers streaking past every couple of minutes.

The long vistas and the straight trajectory of the interstate gave a sense of safety, the security blanket of seeing what was coming long before you reached it, no hairpin turns, but it didn't last.

Just shy of midnight, she turned north onto Highway 89.

Got twenty miles up the road and through a ghost town of charred houses before exhaustion forced her off the highway at a reservoir.

Killed the engine, left the kids to sleep—Cole curled up in the front passenger seat, Naomi in back. She popped the cargo hatch and dug out Ed's sleeping bag and the roadmap, leaving the hatch open to air out the interior.

Dee walked down to the water and unrolled the sleeping bag across the dirt beside the remnants of another camp—candy bar and potato chip wrappers in the grass.

Kicked off her boots, zipped herself in.

She studied the map. By highway, they were roughly two hundred and seventy-five miles from the Canadian border, with one major city to deal with—Great Falls—but she could cut around and actually save time.

She closed the map.

No trees in this open, arid country. Sagebrush everywhere and she could see forever. A range of mountains to the north, the top thousand feet glazed with snow that glowed under the stars and the moon.

Soundless. Windless. The water so still she could see the stars in it.

She eased back into the sleeping bag, said her husband's name. Tears burned down her face. It had been five days without him. She lay there trying to feel if he was gone. From a purely logical standpoint, it seemed

impossible that he wasn't, and she certainly felt apart from him. But, for whatever it was worth (and she had to acknowledge maybe nothing and the probability of self-delusion), she didn't feel his absence. She felt that Jack was still alive, somehow, under the same night sky.

THE semitrailer reeked of shit, urine, vomit, body odor, blood, and something even more malignant. Jack leaned back against the metal wall, his left hand throbbing with such intensity he prayed to lose consciousness again. With the rear door closed, it was pitch black inside and Jack could feel his shoulders grazing the shoulders of the people he sat between as the rocking of the trailer jostled them together. The noise was bewildering—the distant big-rig growl of the V12 Detroit Diesel, the closer rumble of the tires underneath him, a baby wailing, a woman crying, a half dozen voices in whispered conversation.

A man sitting across from him against the other side of the trailer, said, "This is for the guy who just got put in here. Where are we?"

"A mountain pass in Wyoming. Not far from Jackson. Do you know where they're taking us?"

"Nobody knows anything."

"How'd you get here?"

"They picked me up two days ago in Denver."

"Did someone die in here?"

"Yeah, that's what the smell is. They're toward the front."

The pressure in Jack's ears released as they descended the pass. What was left of his ring finger dripped on his pants, and he tucked his hand under his jacket and tried to wrap his undershirt around the open wound, felt a surge of whitehot pain that nearly made him vomit when he touched the jagged phalange of his ring finger.

The baby went on crying for what he guessed was thirty minutes.

He said finally, "Is someone holding that baby?"

"I'm sorry." A woman's voice. "I'm trying to calm her—"

"No, I'm not complaining, I just. . .I can't see anything, and I wanted to make sure someone's holding her."

"Someone is."

No light slipped in anywhere.

They rolled down what felt like a winding road, and after a while the sharp turns diminished.

Someone shoved a plastic jug of water into his hands, said, “One sip,” and Jack didn’t even hesitate to lift it to his mouth and take a swallow.

He passed it on to the person beside him.

“Thank you.” Voice of an older woman.

Every passing moment, he was moving farther away from his family, and the thought of them alone out there, every bit as hungry and thirsty and scared as he was, simply made him want to be back with them or die right now. He tried but he couldn’t stop himself from picturing Dee and the kids inside the pipe, beginning to wonder where he was. After a while, when he didn’t return, they’d search the construction site, and soon after, start calling his name, their voices traveling into the forest. Calm at first. He could almost hear them and it broke his heart. He hadn’t told them where he was going. Hadn’t known himself. Maybe they’d walk up to the pass, but there’d be nothing there, certainly not him, and by then, Dee would be getting frantic and Naomi crying. Possibly Cole as well if he grasped the situation. Would they think he’d abandoned them? Wandered into the woods and somehow gotten injured or killed? How long would they keep looking and what would their state of mind be, when finally, they gave up?

Jack opened his eyes. The diesel engine had gone quiet. The baby had stopped crying. His head rested against the bony shoulder of the old woman to his right and he felt her hand on his face, her whisper in his ear, “This too shall pass. This too shall pass.”

He lifted his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind. You were crying in your sleep.”

Jack wiped his eyes.

The rear door shot up and the light of a sunset flooded the semitrailer with a blast of freezing air. Two soldiers stood on the ramp with automatic weapons, and one of them said, “On your feet everybody.”

The prisoners began to haul themselves up all around him, and Jack struggled onto his feet as well.

He descended the metal ramp into the grass, lightheaded and unstable.

A soldier at the bottom pointed across the open field, said, “You hungry?”

“Yeah.”

“Food’s that way.”

“Why are we being—”

The solider rammed his AR-15 into Jack’s chest. “Get going.”

Jack turned and stumbled along with the crowd, everyone moving through an open field and folding into streams of more people filing out of four other semitrailers—two hundred prisoners by Jack’s estimate. They looked haggard and addled and he searched for the old woman whose shoulder he’d used for a pillow, but he didn’t see anyone who met his mind’s imagining of her.

Over his shoulder, Jack spotted several buildings, and though impossible to be certain in the lowlight, they appeared to be surrounded by small airplanes and a handful of private jets.

Everywhere, soldiers were directing the prisoners toward a collection of tents a quarter mile away on the far side of the field.

“Hot food and beds,” someone yelled. “Keep moving.”

Jack looked for the man who’d cut his finger off, but he didn’t see him.

They crossed the asphalt of a runway. The tents closer now, and straight ahead, less than fifty yards away, a mountain of dirt and a bulldozer.

Jack smelled food on the breeze.

On ahead, people were stopping near the pile of dirt and he could hear soldiers yelling. They were lining the prisoners up shoulder to shoulder.

A soldier shoved him forward, said, “Stand right there and don’t fucking move.”

“Why?”

“We have to inspect you.”

“For what?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Jack stood in a line of ragged-looking people, some of whom had begun to cry.

The soldiers were backing away, Jack’s head swimming with the smell of whatever was cooking across the field.

As he glanced back toward the tents, his eyes caught on the several thousand square feet of raw, freshly-turned earth that he and the other prisoners stood at the edge of.

He looked at the bulldozer again.

By the time he understood what was happening, the two dozen soldiers who'd herded them into the middle of the field were raising their AR-15s.

Someone said, "Oh my God."

Several prisoners took off running, and a soldier squeezed off four controlled bursts. They fell and the prisoners were screaming, others trying to flee, and one of the soldiers yelled and they all opened fire at once.

The noise was tremendous. Slap of bullets into meat. The schizophrenic madness of the machineguns. The screams. All down the line, people were tumbling back into the pit. Maybe two seconds had passed, the muzzleflashes bright in the evening, and the soldiers already edging forward and still firing.

It felt like someone punched him in the shoulder, and then Jack was staring up at the clouds which were catching sunlight on their underbellies, people falling into the pit all around him. Bloodspray everywhere and the smell of shit, urine, and rust becoming prevalent like the sensory embodiment of terror, warm blood leaking all over him, down into his face, appendages writhing all around him. Then the shooting stopped and there came a moment of silence, Jack's ear drums in shock, recovering from the noise, before the sound of a hundred dying people faded in. If Jack had believed in hell, he couldn't have imagined it sounding any worse than this chorus of agony—groans, moaning, weeping, screaming, people dying loudly, quietly, some cursing their murderers, some begging them to do what could not be undone, some just asking why. And the realization slowly dawning on Jack amid the horror—I'm still alive, I'm still alive.

A voice lifted out of the open grave, "Oh God, please finish me."

Jack's shoulder was burning now.

He could see the soldiers standing at the edge of the pit, Jack thinking only of his children as he pulled several bodies over him, and then the machineguns erupted again with a blaze of fire, and he could feel the bodies that shielded him shaking with the impact of the bullets. Shit himself waiting to be shot, but it never happened.

This time, when the guns went quiet, the groans were half what they had been.

Jack's entire body trembled.

He willed himself to be still.

The soldiers near him were talking.

“—don’t serve that meatloaf again. Fucking rancid shit.”

“I love the mac and cheese though. Don’t disrespect.”

“Oh, hell yeah. You got a crawler over there.”

Two bursts from the machinegun.

“All right, boys, who drew cleanup?”

The light was abandoning the sky, and there was little in the way of groaning now, just desperate breathing all around him.

“Nathan, Matt, Jones, and Chris.”

“Well fucking get to it, boys, and before you lose your light. We’re going to party tonight. God, this is going to be a pretty green piece of grass next spring.”

Jack could hear the soldiers walking away, the sound of distant voices, still some movement in the pit.

As one of the bodies on top of him began to twitch, a noise rose up at the far end of the pit, followed by another and another, the last one close to where he lay.

He watched as one of the soldiers climbed down into the pit. They held a chainsaw with a three-foot guide bar, wore a white vinyl apron, a helmet with a plexiglass faceplate. He started across the top layer of bodies, slashing at anything that moved.

Jack tried to lay still, ignoring the burn in his shoulder.

The body on top of him sat up, and in the low light, Jack could see her long, black hair falling down her back. She was crying and he reached up to try and pull her down, but the soldier with the chainsaw had already seen her and was wading over through the bodies.

Jack heard her scream just barely and then the soldier swung his giant chainsaw.

She fell back onto Jack and the blood flowed, blinding him, choking him, and he lay there unmoving as the solider passed by, the noise of the chainsaws growing softer.

Someone yelled, “Jones, look at this guy. Untouched. Didn’t even catch a bullet. Keep playing dead, motherfucker.”

The two-stroke wailed and there were seconds of the most horrendous screaming Jack had ever heard, and then the chainsaw motors idled again.

The soldiers wandered through the pit for another ten minutes, and then the chainsaws went quiet and the voices slipped out of range.

Jack didn’t move for a long time. The blood that covered him becoming sticky and cold and not another sound daring to lift out of the open grave.

His shoulder throbbing.

The clouds overhead gone dark and the sky almost void of light.

He pushed the headless body off of him and sat up.

Off in the distance toward the tents, a bonfire raged and there were fifty or sixty men gathered around it, their laughter and voices carrying across the field.

Jack crawled onto the surface of the pit, a few people still barely hanging on, groaning as he moved across them, one man begging for his help. The pain in Jack’s shoulder making it nearly impossible to set his weight on his right arm, but he finally reached the back edge of the pit and climbed out into the grass.

He kept moving on his stomach across the field through that strange and fleeting grayness between twilight and night. A hundred yards out from the pit, exhaustion stopped him. Still had a fifth of a mile to go to the trees, but he couldn’t catch his breath. Lay on his side watching the bonfire and the soldiers in camp, the reflection of the fire bright off the shine of their black leather boots.

Jack crawled again.

Another twenty minutes before he passed through the wall of trees, stopping ten feet inside the forest. Retched his guts out though there was nothing left but the sip of water he’d had hours ago in the back of the tractor trailer.

He crawled to the nearest spruce tree under an overhang of branches.

On the cusp of pitch-black darkness in the shadow of the forest.

He touched his right shoulder—painful and hot, though not as bad as the last bullet he’d stopped. Couldn’t see the wound, but running his hand along the back of his shoulder, he thought he could feel the exit hole—a circular flare of burned skin.

Despite the pain, he felt a detachment from himself so intense it verged on out-of-body, like a filter setting up between what had happened in the field and his emotional connection to it. He felt a beautiful step removed. He watched himself listening to the soldiers. Watched himself lying on his side on the moist ground with his back against the tree trunk. Watched his

eyes close as the devastation that was this day sat perched beside his head with the patience of a gargoyle, waiting to crush him.

At some point in the night, a noise from the field woke him, and it took Jack a moment to connect it with the growl of the dozer. Through the branches of the spruce tree, he could just make out the lights on top of its cab blazing down into the pit, the scoop pushing earth back into the open grave.

He shut his eyes but another sound wouldn't let him sleep—a crunching like the snap of trees during an ice storm, and he'd almost let it go, so tired, so tired, when he realized what it was. It could only be the bones of those inside the pit, breaking under the dozer's weight.

* * * * *

JACK woke to stomach cramps and the splintering brightness of the sun coming through the branches. He crawled out from under the spruce tree, lightheaded and sore, wondering how much blood he'd lost during the night.

The exposed bone of his left ring finger hurt more than his shoulder.

The meadow was abuzz with soldiers, many of them closer than he would've liked, and some of them with dogs.

He struggled to his feet and started into the woods. It was slow-going. He had no sense of direction. Just a dense pine wood that seemed to go on and on.

By midday, he hadn't crossed a road, a water source, or anything resembling civilization, and as the light started to fail the forest began to climb, until in the twilight, he found himself on a steep, wooded hillside. He sat down. Shivering. Nothing left.

WOKE colder than he'd ever been in his life and covered in frost, curled up on the mountainside and watching the torturously slow progression of sunlight climbing the hill toward the spot where he lay.

When the sun finally washed over him two hours later, he shut his eyes and faced its brightness, let the warmth envelop him. He stopped shivering.

The frost had burned off his clothing. He sat up and looked up the hillside and started to climb.

Somehow, he went on. Hands and knees. Mindless hours. Always up. Endless.

Late afternoon, he lay on a hillside covered in aspen trees. If someone had told him he'd been climbing this mountain for a year, he might've believed them. He was losing control of his thoughts. The thirst fracturing his mind. It occurred to him that if he didn't get up and start walking in the next ten seconds, he wasn't going to get up again. Could feel himself on the edge of not caring.

In the middle of the night, he stumbled out of the forest into a clearing that swept another thousand feet up the mountain to his left, and shot down a narrow chute between the spruce trees to his right. The sky was clear, the moon high, everything bright as day. A golf course, he thought. A steep golf course. Then he noticed the tiny lodge halfway up the hill. The metal terminals that went up the mountain and the cables strung between them. He stared downslope, saw a sign with a black diamond next to the word, "Emigrant."

Jack's legs buckled.

Then he lay with the side of his face in the cold, dead grass, staring down the steep headwall. He could see three mountain ranges from his vantage point, the rock and the pockets of snow above timberline glowing under the moon.

He closed his eyes, kept telling himself he should get up, keep walking, crawling, roll down this fucking mountain if he had to, because stopping was death, and death meant never seeing them again.

Saying her name aloud tied a hot wire of pain around his throat, which felt full of glass shards. So dry and swollen. He said the name of his daughter. The name of his son. He pushed himself up. Sat there dry-heaving for a minute. Then he got onto his feet and started down the mountain.

Jack was a dead man walking two hours later, a thousand feet lower, when he arrived at the foot of the dark lodge. He had to crawl up the steps

and pull himself upright again by the wooden door handles. They were locked. He went back down the steps and pried one of the rocks lining the sidewalk out of the ground.

So weak, it took him four swings to even put a crack through the big square window beside the doors. The fifth swing broke through and the glass fell out of the frame. He scrambled over into a cafeteria, perfectly dark except for where moonlight streamed through the tall windows. So strange to be indoors again. It had been days. The grill in back was still shuttered for the season. He limped over to the drink fountain, mouth beginning to water. Pressed the buttons for Coca-Cola, Sierra Mist, Orange Fanta, Country Time Lemonade, Barq's Rootbeer, but the machine stood dormant, empty.

He made his way between the tables toward a common area that accessed a bar and a gift shop, both locked up. He moved out of the long panels of moonlight into darkness.

Straight ahead, he could just make out a pair of doors. As he moved toward them, they vanished in the black, but he kept on, hands outstretched, until he ran into a wall.

He pushed and the door swung back.

Couldn't see a thing, but he knew he was in a bathroom. Smelled the water in the toilets.

He ran his hand along the wall, found the switch, hit the lights.

Nothing.

Heard the door ease shut. He moved forward to where he thought the sinks might be, and stepped into a wall. Turned around, becoming disoriented as he moved in a different direction. He touched a counter, his hands frantically searching for the faucet. Cranked open the tap, but nothing happened.

Took him several minutes to get his trembling hands on the stall door. He pulled it open and dropped to his knees, hands grazing the cold porcelain of the toilet. Inside the bowl, his fingers slid into chilly water.

He didn't think about where this water had been or all the people who'd sat on this toilet and pissed and shit and vomited here, or the industrial strength chemicals that had been used to clean the bowl. He lowered his face to the surface of the water and drank and thought only of how sweet it tasted running down his swollen throat.

A razor line of light. For a long time, Jack just stared at it. His face against a tiled floor. Cold but not freezing. Piecing together where he was, how he'd arrived here, beginning to face the fact that he wasn't dead. At least he was mostly sure he wasn't.

He crawled out of the stall. The raging thirst gone, but the hunger pangs doubled him over when he stood, his feet so badly blistered he was afraid to see the damage.

He wandered toward the paper towel dispenser.

Cranked out a length of paper, tore it off.

Through the dark, and then he pulled open the door, the light like a railroad spike through his temples.

He limped out into the lobby, which looked almost like civilization in the daylight, sat down and went to work making a bandage for what was left of his ring finger.

He was already pushing open the front doors when he realized what he'd just walked past. Stepped back inside, half-expecting it to have vanished, like a mirage, but there it stood.

He rushed back into the cafeteria to the broken window. Lifted the rock off the floor and brought it into the lobby, where he hurled it through the glass.

He reached through and pulled out everything he could get his hands on —bags of potato chips, candy bars, crackers, cookies—until the vending machine was emptied and its contents spread across the floor.

He ripped into a bag of Doritos.

The chips were stale, leftovers from last season, but the intensity of the flavor made his mouth ache. He sat in the warm sunlight pouring through all the glass around the front entrance. Finished the bag and opened another filled with processed onion rings he would never have ingested in his former life. They were gone in a moment.

He drank his fill of water from the toilet and urinated for the first time in days.

Then grabbed the plastic garbage bag from the trashcan under the sink.

Back in the lobby, he put the two dozen packages of snacks into the bag and slung it over his shoulder.

There was a giant mirror on the wall across from the vending machine. He'd noticed it a little while ago, and now it called to him. The reflection unlike anybody he knew, his face thin as an ax-blade, beard coming in full. He was the color of rust, covered in dried blood, like a zombie-vagrant.

Outside the entrance to the resort, he came across a bicycle rack and a single, abandoned mountain bike standing up between the bars. The tires were low and there was bird shit all over the seat, but it looked otherwise in working order. He climbed aboard and tied his bag of food to the handlebars. He coasted down the sidewalk through the empty parking lot, turned out onto a country road, and then he was speeding along at thirty-five miles per hour down the winding, faded pavement and the cool, piney air blasting his face. The hum of the tires so otherworldly in the face of everything that had come before, like he was out for a bike ride on holiday.

Ten miles on and several thousand feet lower, Jack braked and brought the bike to a stop. Up ahead, a herd of range cattle was crossing the road, and he watched them pass. He'd ridden down out of the alpine forest and now the foothills of the mountains were bare and the air had become warm and redolent of sage.

He rode on, still cruising east and dropping. The foothills lay a mile behind him now, and the mountains fifteen, and the land was barren and open and the sky immense.

The riding turned strenuous when the grade of the road leveled out, but nothing compared to walking on blistered feet or crawling up a mountain.

In the evening he was twenty miles out from the mountains and turning north onto Highway 89, his quads burning and his face glowing with wind- and sunburn.

A mile and a half up the road, he caught the scent of water on the breeze, thinking he'd grown hypersensitive to the smell as of late, some recent adaptation borne out of nearly dying of thirst.

He crested a small rise and there lay the reservoir, the water like ink under the evening sky and the sun just a chevron of brilliance on the ridgeline of those mountains he'd ridden out of.

Abandoned the bike on the grassy shoulder and climbed down the slope to the water's edge. Fell to his knees. Drank. It was cold and faintly sweet, none of that metallic, sterilized tang of toilet water.

He ate a supper consisting of a Butterfinger candy bar, two packages of Lays barbeque potato chips, and a Famous Amos chocolate-chip cookie.

Curled up in the grass by the water, already cold, but at least he wasn't hungry or thirsty. He watched the sun go behind the mountains and the stars begin to burn through the growing dark. Reeking of the dried, rotting gore that covered every square inch of his person.

He was crying before he realized it, hot tears running down his face. Alive now, and on track to stay that way for the time being. There were choices to make.

Head south back into Wyoming, maybe meet up with his family on the way. But they'd been separated now almost four days. They might've been picked up or found transportation or come upon some fate he couldn't bring himself to imagine. Would Dee try to find him, or focus on getting Naomi and Cole across the border into Canada?

He took his BlackBerry out of his pocket. The battery had been dead for weeks.

He held down the power button and typed in Dee's number, held the phone to his ear.

"Hey, baby. I'm at this lake in Montana about thirty miles north of Bozeman. It's beautiful here. So quiet. I'm watching the stars come out. I hope you and the kids are okay. I've had a hard few days."

Out in the middle of the lake, a fish jumped.

"I think I'm going to keep heading north toward Great Falls, our old stomping grounds. I have such sweet memories of that city and you.

"I don't know how to find you, baby, so please stay open and make smart choices. I'm not leaving this country without you, Dee."

The ripples from the middle of the lake were just beginning to reach the shore.

He put his BlackBerry back into his pocket.

The water became still again.

He let his eyes close when they were ready.

THE sound of wind in the grass. Sunshine on his eyelids. It didn't feel cold enough to be first light. He sat up stiff, so sore. An act of willpower just to stand. Late morning, the sun already high. He walked up the grassy slope into the middle of the highway. The vistas north and south were endless. Nothing going. Nothing coming. Just silence and an overload of open space. The horizons so far, the sky so vast, it seemed right on top of him.

He stripped out of his clothes and ran naked and gasping into the freezing water. Ducked under and swam until he had to surface, ten yards out from the shore. He went back and grabbed his stinking clothes and carried them out into waist deep water, rinsed the blood and filth out of everything, and then used one of his shirts to scrub himself down.

Jack rode north up the highway, soaking wet. Rode hours. Until his clothes had dried out and he had nothing left. Stopped in the early evening, no idea how far he'd ridden, but he hadn't passed a car or a house all day, and the world looked much as it had twenty-four hours prior—empty, big sky country—and he still felt very small in it.

TWO miles into his day, coasting down a long, gentle grade in the dawnlight, Jack braked and came to a stop in the road. He squinted, trying to sharpen his nearsightedness into focus. Couldn't tell how far. A mile. Maybe two. The calculation of distance impossible in this country.

A vehicle parked in the road. One of its doors open.

For ten minutes, Jack didn't move and he didn't take his eyes off the car.

He pedaled up the road, stopping every few hundred yards to view things from a closer vantage.

It was a late model minivan. White. Covered in dust and pockmarked with bulletholes. Some of the windows had been shot out, and there was glass and blood on the pavement. All four tires low but intact. Utah license plate.

Jack stopped ten feet from the rear bumper and got off the bike.

Smell of death everywhere.

Somehow, he had missed the girl in the sagebrush. The sliding door of the minivan was open, and it looked as though she'd been gunned down running, her long blond hair caught up in the branches. He wasn't going to get close enough to see how old she was, but she looked small from where he stood. Ten years old maybe.

A woman sat in the front passenger seat and her brains covered the window at her head. Twin teenage boys lay slumped against each other in the backseat. The driver seat was empty.

Jack climbed in behind the wheel. The keys dangled out of the ignition. Fuel gauge at a quarter.

He turned the key.

The engine cranked.

He pulled the boys out of the back and their mother out of the front and lined them all up in the desert. Didn't want to, but he couldn't just leave the girl face up, naked and entangled in the sage.

He stood for a long time staring down at them.

Midday and the flies already feasting.

Jack started to say something. Stopped himself. It would've meant nothing, changed nothing, been solely for his benefit. No words to put this right.

He loaded the bicycle into the back.

He drove north, keeping his speed at a steady fifty. A CD in the stereo had been playing the Beach Boys, and Jack let it go on playing until he couldn't stand it anymore.

He passed through a small, burned town, and fifteen miles north, on the outskirts of another, had to swerve to miss someone walking alone down the middle of the highway.

He stopped the car, watched a man staggering toward him in the rearview mirror, his defective gait unfazed, as if he hadn't even noticed the car that had nearly hit him. He didn't carry a gun or a backpack, nothing in his

hands which he held like arthritic claws, his fingers bent and seemingly frozen that way.

Jack shifted into park.

The closer the man got, the more wrecked he looked—sunburned a deep purple, his dirty white oxford shirt streaked in blood and missing one of the arms entirely, his leather clogs disintegrating off his feet.

He walked right past Jack's window and kept on going, straight down the double yellow.

Jack opened the door.

"Hey."

The man didn't look back.

Jack got out and walked after him. "Sir, do you need help?"

No response.

Jack drew even with him, tried to make eye contact, then finally stepped in front of the man, who stopped, his gray eyes staring off at a horizon beyond even the scope of this infinite country.

In another world completely.

"Are you hurt?" Jack said.

His voice must have made some impact, because the man met his eyes, but he didn't speak.

"I have food in the car," Jack said. "I don't have water, but this road will take us through the Little Belt Mountains. We'll find some in the high country for sure."

The man just stood there. His entire body trembling slightly. Like there was a cataclysm underway deep in his core.

Jack touched the man's bare arm where the shirt sleeve had been torn away, felt the sun's accumulation of heat radiating from it.

"You should come with me. You'll die out here."

He escorted the man to the passenger side and installed him in the front seat.

"Sorry about the smell," Jack said. "It ain't pretty, but it beats walking."

The man seemed not to notice.

Jack buckled him in and closed the door.

They sped down the abbreviated main street of another slaughtered town. Mountains to the north, and the road climbed into them. Jack glanced over

at the man, saw him touching the matter on his window, running his finger through it, smearing it across the glass. A bag of potato chips and a candy bar sat in his lap, unopened, unacknowledged.

“I’m Jack, by the way,” he said. “What’s your name?”

The man looked at him as if he either didn’t know or couldn’t bring himself to say. His wallet bulged out of the side pocket of his slacks, and Jack reached over, tugged it out, flipped it open.

“Donald Massey, of Provo, Utah. Good to meet you, Donald. I’m from Albuquerque.”

Donald made no response.

“Aren’t you hungry? Here.” Jack reached over and took the candy bar out of Donald’s lap, ripped open the packaging. He slid the bar into Donald’s grasp, but the man just stared at it.

“Do you want to listen to some music?”

Jack turned on the Beach Boys.

They rode up into the mountains, Jack hating to be on a winding road again. With all these blind corners, you could roll up on a roadblock before you knew what hit you.

In the early afternoon, they passed through a mountain village that was probably very much a ghost town before anyone had bothered to burn it. A few dozen houses. Couple buildings on the main strip. Evergreen trees in the fields and on the hills, the smell of them coming through the dashboard vents, a welcome change.

On the north side of town, Jack pulled over and turned off the engine. When he opened the door, he could hear the running water in the trees and smell its sweetness.

“You need to drink something, Donald,” Jack said.

The man just stared through the windshield.

Jack lifted a travel mug out of the center console.

Jack rinsed the residue of ancient coffee out of the mug and filled it with water from the creek.

Headed back to the van, opened Donald’s door.

“It’s really good,” Jack said.

He held the mug to Donald’s sunblasted lips and tilted. Most of the water ran down the man’s chest under his shirt, but he inadvertently swallowed some of it.

Jack tried to give him a little more, but the man was disinterested.

“We’ll reach Great Falls in the afternoon,” Jack said. “It’s a big city. I used to live there.”

Impossible to know if the man registered a word he was saying.

“I got separated from my family five days ago.” Jack glanced at the man’s left ring finger, saw a gold wedding band. “Were you with your family, Donald?”

No response.

Jack sipped the water, grains of sand from the creekbed deposited on the tip of his tongue.

“Let me guess what you do for a living. My wife and I used to play this game all the time.” Jack studied the man’s leather clogs—nothing much to look at now, but they suggested wealth. Couple hundred dollars off the shelf. Jack inspected the tag on the back of the man’s collar. “Brooks Brothers. All right.” He looked at Donald’s hands. Covered in blood and still clutched like claws, but he could tell they weren’t the hands of a man who earned his living working outdoors. “You strike me as an ad man,” Jack said. “Am I right? You work in an advertising and marketing firm in Provo?”

Nothing.

“I bet you’d never guess my vocation. Tell you what. I’ll give you three. . .”

Jack stopped. Felt the cold premonition of having missed something lifting out of his gut. He almost didn’t want to know, but the fear couldn’t touch his curiosity.

He opened the glove compartment, rifled through a stack of yellow napkins, plastic silverware, bank deposit envelopes, until he came to the automobile liability policy, protected in a plastic sleeve. He opened it, stared down at the small cards that identified the coverage, the policy limits, and the named insureds.

Donald Walter Massey.

Angela Jacobs-Massey.

Jack looked at Donald.

“Jesus Christ.”

They went on through the mountains, Jack trying to pay attention to what was coming in the distance, but all he could think about was Donald, wondering what had happened back down the road. Couldn’t imagine the man fleeing. He wouldn’t have left his family. Had the affected purposely left him alive then? Murdered his family in front of him and then sent him down the highway on foot?

Jack blinked the tears out of his eyes.

He looked over at the man who now leaned against the door. That look in his face like he’d just been hollowed out. Jack wanting to tell him that he’d taken care of their bodies, or at least done what he could, shown them respect. He wanted to say something beautiful and profound and comforting, about how even in all this horror, there were things between people who loved each other that couldn’t be touched, that lived through pain, torture, separation, even death. He thought he still believed that. But he didn’t say anything. Just reached over and laced his fingers through Donald’s, which barely released their incomprehensible store of tension, and Jack held the man’s hand as he drove them down out of the mountains, and he did not let go.

In the early evening the city lay several miles in the distance. The sun low over the plains beyond. Everything bright, golden. The way Jack dreamed of this place.

He disengaged his hand from Donald’s, the man still sleeping against the door.

The gas gauge needle hovered over the empty slash.

He was debating whether to head into town or take the bypass when he saw the first sign—a billboard that had once advertised a casino, now whitewashed and covered in black writing:

YOU ARE NOW UNDER SNIPER SURVEILLANCE
Stop in the next 400 yards

Jack took his foot off the gas.

Another billboard, same side of the road, one hundred yards further down.

300 yards to stop
Comply or you will be shot

Jack looked in the rearview mirror, saw several vehicles trailing him, no idea where they'd come from.

200 YARDS
TURN OFF YOUR VEHICLE AND. . .

He could see a roadblock a quarter mile in the distance, set up at a fork in the highway.

More than twenty cars and trucks. Sand bags. Staunch artillery.

He was passing vehicles now on the shoulder that had been shot to hell and burned.

DO NOT FUCKING MOVE

The cars behind him were close now, one of them a Jeep Grand Cherokee with the roof cut out and two men with machineguns standing on the back seat, ready to unload.

Jack brought the minivan to a full stop, put it in park, and turned off the engine.

The Jeep hung back thirty yards.

Jack looked over at Donald, started to rouse him, then thought, Why wake the man just to be killed?

Six heavily-armed men in body armor strode up the middle of the highway toward the minivan, one of them dragging an emaciated man along by a leash in one hand, the other holding a cattle prod.

They didn't strike Jack as military, didn't carry themselves so cocksure.

As if it had been scripted, the greeting party stopped thirty yards out from the front bumper of the minivan, and the tallest of the bunch raised a bullhorn to his mouth.

“Both of you, out of the car.”

Jack grabbed Donald’s arm. “Come on, we have to get out.”

The man wouldn’t move.

“Donald.”

“You have five seconds before we open fire.”

Jack opened his door and stepped out into the highway with his hands raised.

“You in the car, get out or—”

“He doesn’t hear you,” Jack yelled. “His mind is gone.”

“Lay down on your stomach.”

Jack got down onto his knees and then prostrated himself across the rough, sun-warmed pavement. Listened to the sound of their footsteps coming toward him, and he didn’t dare move or even raise his head to watch them approach. Just lay there with his heart throbbing against the road, wondering, from a strangely detached perspective, if this was how and where it would end for him.

The men stopped several feet away.

One of them came forward and Jack felt hands running up and down his sides, his legs.

“Clean.”

“Go check the other guy. You, sit up.”

Jack sat up.

“Where’s Benny?”

One of the guards produced a blindfolded rail of a man, naked, beaten to within an inch of his life, bruises covering his body and face, his hands cuffed and a chain linking his ankles above his bare feet.

The tall, bearded man pointed a large revolver at Jack’s face and asked him his name.

“Jack.”

“Is there a bomb in your van?”

“No.”

The one who’d frisked Jack peered over the front passenger door, said, “This one’s completely checked out.”

The bearded man stared at Jack. “Jack, I want to introduce you to Benny.” Benny’s handler gave a hard tug on the leash, dragging him within a foot of Jack. “Here’s the deal. If Benny likes you, I’m going to blow your

brains out all over the road. If he doesn't, we'll talk." He looked at Benny. "Ready, boy? Ready to do some work?"

Benny nodded. He was salivating.

"Benny, I'm going to take your blindfold off and show you our new friend."

Benny urinated on the pavement.

"If you do good, I'll give you some water and a treat. Are you going to do a good job?"

Benny made a sound that wasn't human, and then the bearded man nodded to his handler, who pulled off the blindfold. The wildman crouched in front of Jack. Eyes ringed with black and yellow bruises but still a deep clarity and intensity in them. He was inches from Jack's face. Smelled terrible, like he'd been bedding down in his own shit, and he seemed to be staring at something on the back of Jack's skull.

Jack looked up at the man holding the revolver. "What the fuck is—"

Never saw the thing move, but Benny was suddenly on top of him and trying to tear Jack's throat out with his teeth. Took three men to drag it away and several jolts from the cattle prod before it finally collapsed in the road and curled up moaning in the fetal position.

Jack scrambled back toward the van, trying to catch his breath, the man with the revolver moving toward him, saying, "It's all right. This is good news. If Benny had crawled into your lap and started cooing, you wouldn't be with us anymore."

"What is that thing?"

"Benny's our pet. Our affected pet. He checks out everyone who tries to come into the city. I'm Brian, by the way." He offered a hand, helped Jack onto his feet.

"Is the city safe?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. We figure there's ten, fifteen thousand people here. Many have left, gone north toward the border, but that's a rough trip. It's heavily guarded up there. We've got all the roads into town protected."

"No affected in the city?"

"Nope."

"How's that possible?"

"It was cloudy the night of the event over this part of Montana."

"You haven't been attacked?"

“Not by any force that stood a chance. We’ve got five thousand armed men ready to fuck shit up on a moment’s notice.”

Jack looked around, the RPMs of his heart falling back toward baseline.

“Has a woman with two children passed through in the last week?”

“I don’t think so. You have a picture?”

“No.”

“Your wife and kids?”

Jack nodded.

“You’re the first person to even come up this road in three days. Are they coming here to meet you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know where they are. We were separated in Wyoming.” He looked at the rest of the crew. “Any of you seen them?”

Nothing but headshakes and sorrys.

“My boy is affected,” Jack said. “He isn’t symptomatic or violent, but he saw the lights. He’s seven years old. Would you let him in?”

“How’s it possible he isn’t like the others?”

“I don’t know, but he isn’t. His name is Cole.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for them,” Brian said. “If he isn’t hostile, we’ll let your family through.”

“You swear to me?”

“We don’t kill kids.” Brian pointed through the windshield at Donald. “Friend of yours?”

“I picked him up this morning outside of White Sulphur Springs, just walking down the middle of the road. He needs medical attention.”

“Well, there’s shelters set up at some of the schools. You might find a doctor at one of those.”

“There’s an Air Force base here, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s been on lockdown since everything went to hell. I guess it’s understandable—they’ve got the silos holding the Minuteman nuclear missiles.”

Jack climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“You’ll let me through?”

“Absolutely.” He closed Jack’s door. “Safe travels.”

Jack had passed through the outskirts of Great Falls a handful of times in the last ten years during those long driving trips to see his father when his

old man had still lived in Cut Bank. But he hadn't been in the city proper since he and Dee had left to start a life in Albuquerque, sixteen years ago. Thought this might be the most peculiar circumstance under which to experience the emotion of nostalgia.

Driving the quiet streets, he found it haunting to see the darkness fall upon a city that had no light to raise in its defense.

In the blue dusk, he passed an ice cream shop he and Dee had frequented all those years ago on Friday nights. But everything else, at least what little he could see of it, had changed.

He drove to a hospital and cruised past the emergency room entrance, dark and vacated.

Went on.

There was no one out. The streets empty. The geography of the town might have been an asset, might have stoked his memory, had there been streetlights to guide him. But it was as dark as the countryside in these city limits. He drove for thirty minutes, dipping into the reserve tank, rambling in search of anything that resembled a shelter.

The engine had already sputtered once when he saw the soft smears of light through windows in the distance, and as the form of the building took shape, he recognized it—a high school. People were milling around the steps that climbed to the main brick building, the cherry glow of their cigarettes barely visible in the dark.

Jack pulled over to the curb and turned off the minivan.

He was thirsty again.

"Donald," he said. "We're at a shelter. They might have hot food. Clean water. Cots. I'll find a doctor to look at you. We're in a safe city now. You'll be taken care of."

Donald leaned against the door.

"Don? You awake?" Jack reached over and touched the man's hand.

Cool and limp.

His neck gave no pulse.

Jack climbed the steps to the school. Inside, candlelight flickered off the lockers and it smelled worse than a homeless shelter—stink of body odor and rancid clothing. Cots stretched down the length of the hallway, and

everywhere the noise of hushed conversations and snoring. A baby crying somewhere. He didn't smell food.

He walked a long corridor, cots on either side and open suitcases—barely enough room him to make his way down the middle without trampling someone's filthy laundry.

Five minutes of negotiating the crowded hallways brought him to the entrance of a gymnasium, where a woman sat at a folding table reading by candlelight a library-bound edition of Treasure Island. She looked up at Jack with what he imagined to be the no-bullshit demeanor of a mathematics teacher, or worse, a principal.

"You're new," she said.

"Yeah."

"You from Great Falls?"

"Albuquerque. I'm looking for my family. My wife is Dee. She's short, brown hair, beautiful. Forty years old. My son is Cole, and he's. . ." As he said Cole's name, he thought about Benny and the roadblocks at the edge of town.

"Sir?"

"He's seven. My daughter is Naomi and she's fourteen, looks a lot like her mother."

"And you think they're here?"

"I don't know. We were separated, but I think they might have come to Great Falls—"

"Doesn't ring a bell, but we've got over two thousand people here. Look, I wish I could offer you a cot, but we're maxed out and I don't know when more food is coming. The Air Force base had been trucking in MRE rations, but we haven't seen them in five days." She sounded tired and emotionless. Jack thinking, You haven't seen anything.

He glanced through the open doors into the gymnasium—a mass of sleeping bodies.

"There a morgue around?" he asked. "I've got a dead man in my car. Guy I picked up this morning who didn't make it."

She shook her head. "I don't know what to tell you. We're in a little bit of chaos here."

"If you see my family, tell them I was here looking for them."

Jack drove to a nearby park that took up a single city block. Unbuckled Donald's seatbelt, pulled him out of the front passenger seat, dragged him away from the car. He made it as far as a boulder surrounded by flower boxes whose contents lay in ruin, but could take him no further. He laid Donald down in the grass beside the rock and folded the man's hands across his chest.

Sat with him for a long time in the dark, mostly because he didn't feel right just leaving Donald here alone. Thinking there was something more to be done, though he had no idea what. The breeze was pushing those empty swings, one of them making an awful creaking noise that set Jack's nerves even more on edge.

After a while, he said, "This is the best I can do, Don. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about everything."

And he got up and walked back to the van.

Drove fifteen blocks toward the river, the engine sputtering, cylinders misfiring. He'd wanted to make it to the water, but that wasn't going to happen.

The feeble moonlight was shining off the columns of the civic center several blocks ahead. When he saw them, he realized where he was and brought the minivan to a stop in the middle of the street. He sat staring in disbelief toward the square, little to see in the powerless dark but the five-story block of the Davidson Building. Wondered how it had not occurred to him until this moment to come here.

He put the van back into gear and cranked the steering wheel. Drove over the lip of the sidewalk into the middle of the square between two rows of potted evergreen trees.

Jack turned off the van. Sat in the dark and the quiet, listening to the engine cool. He was in a dark plaza, buildings on either side of him, joined by a skywalk. The fountain nearby, dormant.

So much as he had imagined it, even after all this time.

He opened his door and stepped down onto the concrete. It was cold. There were clouds scudding through the light of the moon. Silence like this was one thing in the wilderness, a completely different matter in the city. No cars out, no people, not even the hum of streetlamps or powerlines. Too dark. Too quiet. Everything wrong.

It hit him. Pure exhaustion. The emotional expenditure of the day. Felt the call of sleep, and the idea of a few hours of unconsciousness, of checking out of all of this, had never sounded better.

The minivan still smelled like death.

He cracked all the windows and laid the front seat back as far as it would go.

WHEN his eyes opened he was staring through the windshield at the windows of an office building thirty feet above him. A sheet of clouds reflected in the dark glass. He sat up. Hungry. Cold. Opened the door and stepped down onto the plaza. Eighteen years ago, there had been a coffeehouse a block from here, and he could almost smell the memory of their French roast, feel how the heat of it had steamed into his face on mornings just like this.

He walked toward Central Avenue. Strange not to know the day, but he was certain it was November now. The sky certainly looked it, and the steel chill in the air felt it. Clouds soft and pregnant, debating whether to snow or drop cold rain.

Up and down the avenue, not a single car on the street. A few of the stores had been looted, broken glass on the sidewalk. Nothing moved but some dead leaves scraping across the road.

Jack went back at the minivan and looked inside. Don’s youngest daughter had been sitting in the third row from what Jack could tell. It looked to him like she’d made the space her own—iPod, magazines, books, a stuffed penguin that had been dragged around forever.

He lifted a drawing pad out of the floorboard, stared at a half-finished sketch of countryside that looked remarkably similar to the Montana waste where he’d stumbled upon this van. She had talent. All she’d used was a black Magic Marker to suggest a sharpened mountain range, miles of sagebrush, and the road that shot a lonely trajectory through that country. He wondered if she’d been drawing when her family was ridden down. A line stopped abruptly at the summit of a mountain, the downslope never finished. The black marker she’d used still lay uncapped on the carpet.

Jack picked a cigar box off the floor, raised the lid.

Markers, pastel pencils, miniature bottles of acrylic paint, charcoal, brushes, erasers, and a sterling silver-etched heart locket that only ten-year-old boys give to ten-year-old girls.

Couldn’t bring himself to open it.

He was all morning writing her name. Big, block letters on the sliding door, the black Sharpies showing up well on the minivan's white paint. He used up three markers coloring in the letters, then took a bottle of white acrylic paint and brushed her name onto the dark plateglass windows of the surrounding buildings.

Walked out into the street to test the visibility.

Dee's name couldn't be missed, even from fifty yards away.

By early afternoon a light mist was falling, and he sat in the front seat behind the wheel, watching the beads of water populate the glass.

Drifted off and when he woke again it was dark and a harder rain falling. He crawled into the very back and stretched out across the young girl's seat. Wrapped himself in a blanket that still carried her smell. Hungry but he thought he should start rationing his bag of junk food, which contained only twelve packages when he'd taken inventory this morning.

The rainfall on the minivan roof was a good sound. He thought about his family until it hurt too much, and then he went to sleep.

THUNDER is what it sounded like in his half-conscious state, and it made the windows tremble. Jack tugged the blanket away from his face, lay there listening to see if it would come again, thinking he might've dreamed it.

It came again. Not thunder.

This was a deeper, focused sound, and it didn't roll across the sky.

He crawled out of the backseat and pulled open the side door.

Walked through the plaza into the street.

Late morning. A low cloud deck. The pavement wet.

He heard it again. Far off. Perhaps beyond the city. He'd never heard it before, not in real life, but he knew it was the sound of bombs exploding.

The plateglass on the first floor of the Wells Fargo bank had been smashed out some time ago. Jack stepped through into the lobby. Dark, silent. He looked at the vacant bank teller stations. The velvet rope lines. Signs for commercial and residential mortgage departments. A water fountain stood against the wall between the men's and women's restrooms.

He walked over and turned the knob. Nothing. He went into the women's restroom and tried the faucet. Dry. There was water in the toilets, but he wasn't at that point just yet. Comforting to know it was here, though.

He crossed the plaza to the Davidson Building. The entrance doors were locked. The glass intact. He uprooted a baby fir tree from a concrete planter which must have weighed fifty or sixty pounds. When he'd finally hoisted it up, he ran toward the doors and heaved the planter at the glass like an oversize shot put.

Straight through. Shattered across the marble floor.

He took his time stripping branches from the fir tree, relieved just to have something to occupy his mind. When he'd finished, he unbuttoned his outer shirt and tore it into long strips. Raised the hood of the minivan, unscrewed the cap to the oil tank, dipped the pieces of his shirt inside. He tied the oil-coated cloth around the end of the stick, no idea if this would even work. He'd seen some version of it on a TV survival show several years ago, but he kept thinking he was missing a step.

He held the glowing orange coils of the van's cigarette lighter to a dry corner of the fabric.

A flame appeared, crept across the cloth, and then the end of Jack's torch ignited.

It burned beautifully.

He laughed out loud.

Jack arrived on the fourth-floor landing, firelight flickering off the concrete walls of the stairwell. He opened the door and stepped out into a carpeted hallway. Moved down the corridor, brass nameplates catching torchlight. Stopped at a window with the words financial advisors stenciled across the glass. In the firelight, he could see a waiting area, several chairs, a small table stacked with magazines. Jack tried the door, then set the torch on the fire-retardant carpet, lifted the metal trashcan standing beside an elevator, and hurled it at the glass.

Through the office windows, daylight filtered in. Down the length of the wall, he studied a photographic series of grinning salesmen. He carried his torch into a breakroom and opened the refrigerator. A dozen cups of undoubtedly-spoiled yogurt. Something wrapped in tinfoil. A Styrofoam box of leftovers that smelled like a rotting corpse.

A water cooler stood nearby.

He lodged the torch in the sink and knelt down on the floor. Held his mouth under the tap and drank until his stomach ached.

He entered a corner office and sat in the leather chair behind the desk. Propped his feet up and stared at framed photographs—a soccer team of boys in green uniforms, a family—sunglassed and screaming—on a raft in the midst of whitewater, three beer-flushed men, arm-in-arm, in the fairway of a golf course. He swiveled around in the chair and rolled toward the window. A half mile to the west, he could see the Missouri. The water gray-green under the clouds. Plains beyond. Down in the plaza, the minivan stood glazed in rainwater.

A plastic inbox tray rattled on the glasstop.

The building shook.

Two seconds later, he heard the blast.

Miles away, south of town, black smoke lifted off the prairie.

He carried the half-filled canister of water down the stairwell and through the lobby.

Outside, a light rain fell, the air cold enough to cloud his breath.

He climbed into the minivan and curled up in the backseat under the little girl’s blanket. Shut his eyes. Rain hammering the metal roof.

My day, he thought. Fire and water.

Black of night, he shot awake.

Not only explosions but gunfire now. Inside the city limits.

He climbed into the front seat and peered through the windshield.

The sky lit up—cushions of cloud overhead and snow falling out of them.

Darkness.

The delayed boom of whatever artillery shell had just exploded.

A brighter flash toward the horizon.

Then black.

No way he was going back to sleep.

JACK watched the sky lighten through the glass, his fists still clenching the steering wheel, as they had for the last two hours. Like listening to a hurricane come ashore and the intensifying terror of the eye wall creeping closer. The sound of war coming.

He straightened up in the seat, pushed open the door, stepped outside. Snow clung to everything, and he brushed it off the minivan's sliding door to uncover Dee's name.

Realized he was crying. What if the guards hadn't allowed Cole into the city? Would Dee have even risked an entry this close to the border? No. She'd have gone around, tried to rush the kids across. They might even be in Canada by now. They might be dead in Wyoming. Might be anywhere. But not here. Not with him.

He sat down in the snow.

They weren't coming.

They weren't coming.

They weren't—

The jackhammer pounding of a machinegun broke out what couldn't have been more than a few blocks away.

He pulled himself up by the door handle and staggered out into the street which was lined with mostly two- and three-story buildings and trees with a few orange leaves left dangling.

Three blocks down, muzzleflashes blossomed from a top floor window.

The firing went on for a full minute.

When it stopped, silence fell upon the city.

Specks of snow seemed to hang weightless in the air.

Jack stood in the street for a long time, but the shooting was over.

He walked back to the minivan, suddenly hungry, but even more tired, and he was asleep seconds after his head hit the seat cushion. He slept so hard it seemed like barely a minute had passed, and then he was awake again, his eyes burning with strain and disorientation and a noise like Armageddon right on top of him.

He peered over the back of the seat, saw people running through the square, twenty feet beyond the front bumper of the van. Dressed like civilians, he thought, in shabby clothes so tattered they all appeared to be molting. The three men bringing up the rear held shotguns at waist-level. They were backpedaling and firing and Jack could see the abject fear in their faces laced with the mad rush of adrenaline, something screaming at him to get the fuck down, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. The shotguns thundered and one of the men collapsed and then the small platoon streamed into the Davidson building.

For fifteen seconds, nothing. No sound. No movement.

Then a company of black-clad men swarmed the square, some of them taking position behind the planters, a handful charging into the building.

Jack got down into the floorboard and flattened himself against the carpet, pulling the blanket on top of him as machineguns erupted all around him, men yelling over the mayhem, the shotguns booming down out of the building several floors above, pellets and rounds chinking into the side of the minivan, and then a window exploded, glass everywhere, and the van sank to one side, a tire punctured.

A man began to scream nearby, and Jack covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut and he was saying her name. He could feel his lips moving, though he couldn't hear the words, not even inside his head, over the terrible noise.

An explosion blew out every window in the van and then came a lull.

Numerous footsteps pounded the concrete. Someone shouted, and the next time Jack heard gunshots, they sounded distant, muffled.

He waited for another minute, then slowly sat up. Brighter in the van with the tinted windowglass shot out. A half-dozen men lay scattered across the plaza, one of them still crawling.

On the fourth floor of the Davidson building a black crater smoked, ragged flames cutting through.

Jack made his way up into the driver seat and eased the door open.

Gunshots inside the Davidson building.

He stared at the bank. Twenty yards tops. Get inside. Find an office, crawl under a desk. Wait for silence.

He glanced back toward the Davidson building. A man stepped out of the lobby and walked into the square. He was looking at the minivan. Jack

ducked as far as he could under the steering wheel. More voices. Orders being shouted. Fading away now. He eased up into the seat again and peered through the shattered windshield. The black-clad men had lined the civilian platoon up in the middle of the street. They were making them get down on their knees at gunpoint.

A man in a red bandana stood in front of the POWs. Jack could just hear his voice from the front seat of the van, telling them he would be pleased to shoot them each in the head, felt sure they would in turn be pleased with this outcome. However, if even one of them resisted, his unit would spend the rest of the day torturing them to death.

A handful of the civilians wept. He could see their shoulders bobbing. But no one moved.

The man in the red bandana went to the first civilian, pulled a handgun from his holster, and shot him between the eyes.

He went on down the line, stopping midway to reload, Jack watching the heads of the condemned snapping back, bodies toppling, found himself drawn to study the unimaginable bracing of the next one to die.

Ultimate tension, then emptiness, then ten people lay dead on the snow-dusted street where ten had knelt living thirty seconds before. The soldiers left them there, drifting on down Central Avenue toward the river, in a formation that made Jack certain they were military.

When the last man had slipped out of view, Jack breathed again, leaning forward, his forehead touching the steering wheel.

Staying here, in this plaza, wasn’t going to work. Not with the city under siege.

Meant pushing on.

As he lifted his head, the man in the red bandana reappeared around the corner of the Davidson building. He was walking back into the square, straight toward the van. Jack’s heart jumped from zero to afterburn, a hot spike of panic flooding in.

He slammed his shoulder into the door and barreled out of the minivan at a dead sprint toward the bank, waiting for the gunshots, waiting, the shattered windows rushing toward him, waiting. Just as he reached them, he heard three shots squeezed off faster than he could have imagined, and he was inside, untouched he thought, turning left now, bolting up a set of stairs

into the mortgage department, dark save for where crumbs of daylight filtered in through the offices that overlooked the plaza.

Jack stopped.

He could hear the man's footfalls in the lobby down below.

Now running up the stairs.

Jack moved into a large, open maze of cubicles and desks, his world getting darker every step he took away from those windows.

He got down on his hands and knees and crawled under a desk. Couldn't see a thing. Panting. The noise deafening. He shut his eyes, tried to calm himself, and when his heart finally slowed, he heard the footsteps—soft as mice—moving into the mortgage department toward him.

He took long, slow inhalations through his nose, and even in the dark chill of the bank, lines of sweat were running down out of his hair into his eyes.

The man let out a sharp breath. Couldn't have been more than four or five feet away.

His footsteps trailed off into the black, only audible when the boot tread caught on the carpet—an imperceptible scratch.

Jack's legs burned. He'd crammed himself up underneath a desk, the wood digging into his backbone.

Five minutes passed without a sound.

Ten minutes.

Twenty.

Then an hour was gone, maybe longer. Impossible to know.

He leaned forward, rocking slowly back onto his hands and knees, his feet tingling with an excruciating numbness. Crawled several feet into the dark and stood, knees popping.

He glanced back over his shoulder, saw the barest thread of light sliding around a corner. Wondering, should I crawl back under the desk and wait a few more hours? Maybe the man with the red bandana had gone to get a flashlight. Maybe he'd left with no intention of returning. Maybe he was waiting out there just around the corner.

Jack moved forward between the cubicles, back into the light.

He stepped into the hallway.

Back down the stairs, through the lobby. He stood in that glassless window frame looking out across the plaza.

Snowing again. Nothing moving. The minivan riddled with bulletholes. Some of the dead lay beside their weapons, and he felt a subtle charge at the prospect of getting his hands on a gun again.

Ten steps into the plaza, Jack bent down to unwind the strap of a machinegun that had tangled around the arm of a dead man.

Froze as his finger touched the strap. An icy prickle down the center of his back. A door to the minivan was creaking open.

Jack let go and stood up, turning slowly.

The man in the red bandana sat in the front passenger seat, lighting a cigarette. “Finally.” Took a deep drag. “Didn’t want you to see the smoke.”

He started toward Jack, motioning him away from the dead man with his automatic pistol.

“The fountain,” he said.

Jack crossed the plaza, never taking his eyes off the man, as if that somehow kept the balance of control in his favor.

The fountain was a circle of old concrete, fifteen feet across, with a stone feature rising out of the middle that had once rained water. Most of it had long since evaporated, and what remained was stagnant and filled with discs of ice.

The men sat five feet apart.

Jack saw that the man’s hands were covered in dried blood that was cracking on his skin like old asphalt. He looked out at the plaza—the minivan, the dead, the blood on the melting snow.

In proximity, the soldier looked nothing like Jack had imagined. A kinder face. Three-day beard. Thoughtful eyes. Curls of black hair that slipped out from under the bandana. His fatigues weren’t black as Jack had first thought, but some pattern of night camouflage comprised of dark blues.

Might have been Jack’s age, perhaps a year or two younger.

He stared at Jack while he smoked, handgun resting on his leg, trained on Jack’s stomach.

“Is Dee alive?”

Jack didn’t respond.

“Where’s your family, Jack?”

A twinge of curiosity cut through the fear.

“How do you know my name?”

The man smiled, Jack feeling the eerie prickling of recognition.

He said, “Kiernan.”

“I saw her name all over this square, and it didn’t even click with me until I was walking away.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Me and some Guard unit buddies from Albuquerque defected. We’ve been heading north, just like you, killing and fucking and ravaging and just causing all sorts of mayhem. Time of my life. Are you expecting Dee and the family? Because we can wait. I’d be totally up for that.”

“I haven’t seen them in days.”

“You got separated?”

Jack nodded.

“Where?”

“Wyoming. Where’s your family, Kiernan? I seem to remember Dee telling me you had children.”

Kiernan took another drag. “Rotting in our backyard back in New Mexico.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I killed them.”

Jack could feel, even in the light of everything he’d seen, a new horror at the registration of this.

Kiernan smiled. “Smoke?”

“Not in years.”

He tugged a crumpled pack of Marlboro Reds out of an inner pocket, offered it to Jack. “Treat yourself. I don’t think it really matters anymore. Do you, Jack?”

Jack’s hands shook. He plucked a crooked cigarette from the pack along with the lighter. Four attempts to fire the tobacco sprigs hanging out of the end. Kiernan got another cigarette for himself.

“So why are you here, Jack?” he asked. “In this square out of all the places in the wild wild west?”

Jack said nothing, just pulled the smoke into his lungs. It was sweet and it burned.

“You think Dee’s going to find you here. That it?”

Jack exhaled, felt the nicotine hit and drag him a few steps deeper into himself, like sliding a filter between this moment and his perception of it. A dulling of the fear.

“Can I ask you something?” Jack said.

“As long as your cigarette’s still burning.”

“When you’re trying to fall asleep at night, do you see the faces of your wife and children?”

“Sometimes.”

“How do you not kill yourself?”

“That you could even ask that is a perfect demonstration of why you’re all being slaughtered. Now answer my question. Why are you here?”

The idea of lunging at Kiernan occurred to Jack, and with it a monster dose of weakness and fear that slashed through his nicotine rush.

Kiernan smirked. “You’d never pull it off. Not on your best day and my worst. Answer my fucking question.”

“I’m here because this is where I ran out of gas.”

“Why do you want to make me angry?”

Jack smoked.

“In all my travels north,” Kiernan said, “I was always looking for your green Land Rover. Always chasing you and Dee, even though I never expected to actually find you.”

“What is it like?” Jack said.

“What is what like?”

“To have become. . .whatever you are now.”

“All our life, Jack, we spend wondering, you know? Now, it’s all about knowing.”

“You were blind but now you see?”

“Something like that.”

“What do you know now that you didn’t before?”

“You taught philosophy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So you know. . .words just fuck up true meaning. Even if I could make you understand, I wouldn’t.”

“Why’s that?”

“You didn’t see the lights. Just so I’m clear. . .you have no way to contact Dee, but you think she’s going to show up here. Why? Was it prearranged in the event you two were—”

“I’ve been here three days. She’s not coming.”

“She could be dead.”

“It’s all I think about. How many children did you have?”

“Three.”

Jack flicked off the ash.

“Did you look in their eyes while you murdered them?”

“I was crying. They were crying, asking what they’d done. My wife screaming. Horrible day. I need to know why you’re here before your cigarette’s gone. The curiosity will eat at me.”

“I told you. I ran out of gas.”

Kiernan shook his head. “You’re going to make me threaten you. Aren’t you?”

“Fuck your lights and fuck you.”

Kiernan let his cigarette slip out of his hand, hiss out in the snow. He stood, lifting his shirt so Jack could see the sheathed Ka-Bar combat knife.

“When I open you up and start pulling stuff out and feeding it to you, you will talk. You will tell me everything I want to know and more. You’ll curse Naomi and Cole with your last breath and beg me to do the same to them.”

Still had an inch of tobacco to go, but Jack threw his cigarette into the pool.

“You can’t touch it, and you know it, and it kills you, doesn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Even if I could make you understand, I wouldn’t.”

Kiernan unsnapped the sheath, holstered his pistol, and drew the Ka-Bar.

“One last thing,” Jack said. “You and your batshit-crazy friends have fucked up our world, but you’ve also made me a better father, and you made me love my wife again, and for that I thank you.”

Jack stared down into the pool.

The ice melted and the water turned clear and the fountain began to rain. He looked up. The sky now a bright, almost painful blue. Midday in the square. A dozen people eating lunch in the blinding fall sunshine.

Jack sat with an iced coffee, ten minutes left on his lunch break.

She sat at that same table fifteen feet away, engrossed in a textbook, a tray of half-eaten salad pushed aside. Third day in a row she’d eaten lunch in the plaza. Third day in a row he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

He’d walked up to strange women before and asked for a date. No big deal. He was good-looking and tall. Confident. But something about this girl put him off his game. She was gorgeous, sure, but it was more than that

—maybe the white lab coat fucking with him (already fantasized about that), maybe the intensity with which she read—never moving except to turn the page or brush away a strand of loose, auburn hair that contained honest-to-God strands of gold.

Yesterday, he'd spent the whole hour building up the nerve. Finally he stood with five minutes left, shaky, his mouth completely dry as he approached, caught a whiff of something—shampoo or body wash—and he knew he'd only make a fool of himself. Walked right on past into the Wells Fargo bank and just stood watching her through the tinted glass until she finally packed her book into a tattered Eastpak and went on her way.

Now there were five minutes left in this hour. A repeat of yesterday. He'd fucked around and put himself in the same position.

He stood quickly and started toward her table, trying to get there before he had the chance to talk himself out of it. He was three feet away from her, wholly uncommitted to any of this, when the tip of his sneaker caught on the lip of a concrete slap.

Jack went down hard and fast, and when he looked up from the ground he was staring at the rivulets of his iced coffee running down her leg and dripping off the hem of her lab coat.

"Oh my God," he said, picking himself up. "Oh my God." As he got back onto his feet, he saw that he'd somehow managed to dump his entire coffee on her book, her white coat, skirt, even in her hair—maximum damage inflicted with half a cup of iced coffee.

She glared up at him, possibly more shocked than he was, Jack mumbling, trying to string together a coherent sentence that finally came together as, "I'm a total idiot."

The anger in her eyes melted away. She wiped the coffee from her face and looked down at her coat, and all Jack could think was that she was even more beautiful at point blank range.

"Let me pay for the book and the coat and—"

She waved him off.

"It's okay. You all right? That looked bad."

"Yeah." He'd have a black bruise on his elbow by nightfall, but in this moment, he felt no pain. "I'll live once I get passed the devastating humiliation."

She laughed. Like nothing he'd ever heard. "Oh, come on, wasn't that bad."

"Actually, it was."

"No, it—"

"I was coming over to ask you out."

Her face went blank.

Longest moment of his life.

"Bullshit," she finally said.

"Excuse me?"

"You're just having fun with me."

Jack smiled. "Would you give me a do-over?"

"A what?"

"A do-over. Let me have another shot at this."

He couldn't tell for sure in the brilliant afternoon sunlight, but she might have blushed.

"Okay," she said.

"I'll be right back. It'll go better, I promise."

Jack walked to the fountain. His heart beating so fast he could barely breathe. He sat down and looked over at the table. She was watching him now and she'd taken her sunglasses off. He started toward her again, stopping at her table with his back to the sun, so she sat in his shadow.

"I'm Jack," he said.

"Hi, Jack, I'm Deanna. Sorry about this mess. Some asshole spilled his coffee all over me."

And she smiled, and he looked into her eyes for the first time. Had never felt anything like it. Up until this moment, he thought he'd experienced pure attraction, but all those other times, other women, had been lust—he saw that now—and this wasn't that. Not just that. There was an energy present, something combustive between them that hit him in the solar plexus. She had eyes that were dark blue but also luminescent, and later, when he thought about them, their color and clarity would remind him of a lake where he'd often camped with his father in Glacier, so deep but so clear the sunlight shot all the way down to the stones at the bottom and made the water glow.

But he barely noticed the intensity of her eyes in the moment. It was all electricity, a terrible current, like looking into the future, everything

prefigured—a life together, a daughter, a mortgage, a son born two months premature, the death of Jack's mother, an automobile wreck that would take Deanna's parents on Thanksgiving night eight years from now, moments of indescribable happiness, long winters of depression, a slow drifting, a betrayal, fear, anger, compromise, stasis, but when it all lay stripped to the bone, whatever mysterious alchemy had been present in this moment, would be present always. Untouched by their failures. Everything changed, and nothing.

This is what he saw, what he sensed on some primal frequency, when he looked into his wife's eyes for the first time on a fall day in the American west that was so perfect it would always break his heart to think of it. What he still felt, eighteen years later in the same city square, when his eyes met Dee's again.

She looked unreal, moving among the dead like a ghost toward the fountain, emaciated, tears riding down her cheeks.

Kiernan must have seen the glitch in Jack's attention, because he glanced back just as Dee raised an old revolver.

"What are you doing here, Kiernan?" she asked.

"Waiting for you, love."

The gunshot reverberated between the buildings.

Kiernan stumbled back and sat down beside Jack.

He was still holding the knife, and Jack grabbed it and stood facing him.

Blood ran down the man's face out of a hole through his left eye.

The blade of the Ka-Bar passed through his chestplate with no effort and Jack buried it to the hilt. Kiernan toppled back into the icy pool, a cloud of murky red surrounding him, the weight of his boots and fatigues pulling him under as the one good eye blinked frantically.

Jack turned around and Dee was there. He pulled her down into the snow and he was on top of her, kissing her, like drinking water again, like breathing, and they came apart only to breathe, both crying like babies. He held her face in his hands and wouldn't let go for fear she would vanish or he'd wake up and realize it was him dying in the fountain and these were his last thoughts.

"You're here, aren't you?" he said, and he kept saying it, and she kept telling him that she was, and that she was real. He couldn't take his hands off her, and he couldn't believe this was happening.

“You didn’t have any problems getting Cole into the city?” Jack asked. They were walking up 3rd Street North toward the library, each holding two machineguns taken off the dead men in the square like a pair of bad action-flick heroes. “It was on lockdown when I got here several days ago. They weren’t letting any of the affected in, but I told them you might be passing through with a boy who was.”

“We drove in last night,” Dee said. “The barricade had been destroyed. We almost didn’t make it, Jack. Bombs going off everywhere. Gunfights on almost every block. A couple of really close calls. It’s a full-scale war on the east side of town. Thousands dead. Easily.”

They passed a law office that had been hit with a mortar shell. Wet pleadings plastered all over the sidewalk.

“How did you know to come to the square?”

Dee smiled. “How did you?”

“I’d gone to the shelter looking for you. Nobody had seen you or the kids. I drove downtown, out of gas, desperate, and then the headlights shone on the Davidson Building. Today was my third in the square. I didn’t know if you’d try to come here or just get the kids across the border. For all I knew, you were dead.”

“When I saw the mileage sign for Great Falls, I knew if you were alive, if you had any strength left in your body, you’d come to this place.”

“So you have a car?”

“Yeah.”

“You should’ve tried to cross the border without me.”

“Don’t say that. You wouldn’t have.”

Machineguns chattered a dozen blocks away.

“I came here this morning,” Dee said, “but it was crawling with soldiers.”

“You saw what I wrote on the side of the car?”

“I started crying when I saw it. Lost it. I hid until the soldiers left, but then Kiernan came back to kill you. I watched him chase you into the bank. I thought. . . . . .” She shook off the wave of emotion. “You were in there so long.”

“I can’t believe you came here, Dee.”

She stopped and kissed him.

Half a mile away, a bomb exploded.

“Come on,” she said. “We better run.”

Jack knelt down beside the sofa in the historical archive room of the Great Falls Public Library. Dee shined a flashlight on the ceiling, and in the refracted light Jack looked down at his children, sleeping head-to-toe. Touched his hand to Cole’s back.

“Hey, buddy. Daddy’s here.”

Cole stirred, eyes fluttering. They opened, got so wide Jack knew the boy had given him up for dead.

“Is it you?” the boy said.

“It’s me.”

Cole seemed to think things over for a minute.

“I dream about you every night and you talk to me just like this, but every time I wake up, you’re gone.”

“You’re awake, and I’m here, and I’m not going to be gone again.”

He drew the boy into his arms.

“Why are you crying?” Cole said.

“Because I’m holding you, and I didn’t think I ever would again.”

Naomi sat up at the other end of the couch. “Oh my God.” She burst into tears and lunged toward Jack, and he grabbed her, too, now holding his children in his arms, and he could not think of a time in his life when he’d been more overloaded with joy.

Dee wouldn’t take his word for it that he was okay. She made him strip and examined every square inch of his body with the flashlight, starting with the recent gunshot wound to his right shoulder.

“How’s it feel?”

“Pretty sore these last few days.”

“It’s infected. Come with me.”

She took him into the bathroom and cleaned the wound as well as she could with a few paper towels and antiseptic hand soap.

“You have to try and keep it clean until we find some bandages.”

She held up his left arm.

“What’s this?”

He slowly unwound the filthy bandage covering his ring finger.

Dee gasped when she saw it.

“Forgot to mention this,” he said. “Soldier at the top of Togwotee Pass cut it off.”

She grabbed the flashlight off the sink and shined the light on the jagged phalange and the scab trying to form across it.

Tears in her eyes again. “Your ring finger,” she said. “Your ring.”

Later, while the kids slept, he and Dee crashed on a sofa, and they talked as night fell. Soon it was pitch black except when light flickered through the tall windows in the archive room. Like watching a rainless thunderstorm, except even the most distant detonations shook the building’s foundation and made dust rain down from the ceiling into their eyes.

Jack drifted off and when he woke again, he was still holding Dee on the couch.

Her ear against his mouth. Didn’t know if she was sleeping. Whispered anyway. Told her how his heart was so full, how if they ever got someplace safe, he would spend every waking moment making her happy, loving her, loving Cole and Na. Fuck the life they’d walled themselves in with. He didn’t care if they lived in a trailer in the middle of nowhere. Let them be poor. Let them scrape by. He just wanted to be with her, every second of every hour of every day. Wanted to see her old and slow and gray. Watch her hold their granddaughters, their grandsons.

She didn’t respond except to make a sleepy sigh and to nuzzle in a little closer.

Jack sat up. The building shook, books falling off the shelves. His ears ringing. Dee was up too, her lips moving, but he couldn’t hear anything, and then the sound came rushing back—the kids screaming, Dee shouting. He got to his feet, the room brilliantly lit through those tall windows by the flames consuming a building several blocks away, burning with such intensity he could feel the heat through the glass.

He opened his mouth to say something but a fast-building roar stopped him, something approaching, the noise of it getting louder and closer. And then it was right on top of them, like God screaming, and in the flamelight,

Jack could see his children covering their ears, mouths dropped open, eyes wide with terror.

Then it was gone, and the room filled with enough silence for the sounds of distant machinegun fire to filter in.

Jack was panting—they all were.

He turned to Dee, said, “We’re—”

A flash of scalding white light. The window blew out and something hit Jack in the chest that was neither force nor sound, but a terrible fusion of the two, and he was lying on his back, his molars jogged loose in their beddings, telling himself to get up, to check on his children, but his legs were slow to respond.

The ringing in his ears had become a jackhammer.

He sat up, eyes still struggling after that blinding detonation.

The building across the street had taken a direct hit, and amid the massive flames, he could see steel girders sagging, melting in the heat.

He was unstable on his feet.

Dee looked all right. She was sitting up, stunned, and he could see that her eyes were open, blinking slowly.

Cole and Naomi lay in fetal positions on the floor, still bracing, covering their heads and trembling. Jack put his hands on them and patted their backs, ran his fingers through their hair, and then Dee was beside him. He tried to say something to her, couldn’t hear his own voice inside his head, but Dee grabbed his face and pulled him close enough to read her lips.

He slung the machinegun straps over his neck and carried Naomi down the staircase, Dee leading with the flashlight, Cole draped over her shoulder.

On the second-floor landing, Jack heard that sound again, muffled now but racing toward a violent climax, and then the building shook with such intensity he couldn’t believe it resisted collapse.

Everywhere on the ground level, shelves had toppled. They waded through books, and the smell of old paper filled the air.

The shock wave had exploded the wall of windows at the entrance. They passed over mounds of shattered glass and outside into a nightmare world. Black smoke poured out of the ruins of whatever had stood across the street

and at the pinnacle of the flagpole, the United States and Montana State flags had begun to burn at the fringes.

Dee led Jack over to a green Cherokee parked out of sight between the building and a hedge.

She glanced back, yelled, “You drive,” and tossed him a ring of keys.

Dee opened the rear passenger door and set Cole inside. Jack handed Naomi over, and after Dee had gotten their daughter in and shut the door, he put his lips to his wife’s ear.

“How much gas?”

“Enough to reach the border.”

“You have to be my gunner.” She nodded. “Shoot any fucking thing that moves.”

Jack climbed in behind the wheel and cranked the engine as Dee slammed her door and lowered the window.

His mind ran hot, trying to orient himself in the city.

Essentially two routes north—I-15 to Sweetgrass or Highway 87 to Havre.

He shifted into gear and eased the Jeep down through the steaming grass onto the pavement, the heat from the building across the street so intense it broke him out into a sweat.

He punched the gas, felt the wind and smoke streaming through the windshield into his face. The glass had been shot out, and that was going to make driving at high speed infinitely more difficult.

By the time he rolled up on the next intersection, he’d decided to try the highway north out of town. Jack glanced over at Dee, who already had the machinegun shouldered and aimed out the window. He tapped her leg, mouthed, “You ready?” She nodded. He glanced into the backseat, saw his children down in the floorboards, didn’t know if they could hear him, but he yelled, “Kids, do not lift your heads no matter what happens.”

Jack turned onto 3rd Avenue North and gunned the engine.

In the distance, tracers streamed into the low cloud deck, giving the eastern sky a radioactive burn.

They were doing eighty down the street, and he could barely see a thing in the absence of headlights and with the wind and smoke rushing into his

face.

They shot through several dark blocks where nothing had been touched, Jack driving blind. He had reached to turn on the headlights when muzzleflashes erupted all around them like a swarm of fireflies, bullets striking the Jeep on every side and the windows exploding in fountains of glass, the racket of Dee's machinegun filling the car as she screamed at him to go faster.

They sped away from the gunfire.

One block of peace.

Jack uncertain whether his hearing was improving or if they were coming up on another battle but the sound of gunfire and exploding mortar shells became audible over the groaning engine.

At the next junction, he looked down the intersecting street and saw a tank rolling toward them, flanked by a pair of Strykers.

A quarter mile ahead, a succession of ten closely-staggered explosions lit up four city blocks, and Jack could feel the road shuddering underneath him, everything illuminated brighter than midday, as if the sun had gone supernova. He could see people drawn to the windowframes of almost every building they raced past—unarmed, doomed, gaunt faces awash in firelight.

In the rearview mirror, Jack saw that one of the Strykers had launched out ahead of the tank. From it issued several splinters of light and a low-frequency, concussive report, like someone pounding nails. Two 50-caliber rounds punched through the back hatch, one of them obliterating the dash.

They had reached the blast zone, and up ahead, the road vanished into towers of incomprehensible fire.

Jack swung a hard left and drove up a sidestreet parallel to an elementary school, carpet-bombed into molten rubble.

The street teemed with people on fire who had fled the building, fifty of them he would have guessed. Their collective screams as they literally melted onto the pavement made Jack pray for deafness.

He was trying to drive around them, but they kept stumbling in front of the Jeep, and that Stryker was coming, nothing to do but drive through them, over them, Dee screaming, "Oh dear God," over and over, and then she started shooting.

Two blocks from the school, Jack spotted the sign for the highway, and he veered onto the road and pushed the gas pedal into the floorboard.

The street was empty and they were screaming north, all the fire and death confined to the rearview mirrors.

They shot across a river and through the northern outskirts of the city.

Jack finally turned on the headlights.

They were pushing a hundred now into a vast and welcoming darkness.

North of town, nothing but black, endless prairie. Even forty miles out, they could still see the glow of everything burning and the tracer fire arcing through the sky. Jack had found a pair of sunglasses under the parking brake. He wore them against the wind, driving northeast now, the speedometer pegged and the noise like standing under a waterfall. The kids, and now Dee, crouched in the floorboards to escape it, but he didn't mind. The rush of wind meant that every passing second that city was falling farther and farther behind, and the Canadian border rushing closer.

Jack had just glanced at the ruined dash, wondering about the time, when he noticed the line of deep blue—just a single shade up from black—lying across the eastern horizon.

DEE woke in the front passenger floorboard, cramped as hell, cold, and staring up at her husband who wore sunglasses, his hair blown back, face ruddy with windburn and the glow of what she guessed was sunrise. It was loud and the Jeep rode rough—either the shocks had given out or they were no longer traveling on a paved road.

She watched him. Even with the heavy beard coming in, he looked so thin, and her heart was swelling. She'd lost him, felt the awful vacuum of their separation, and now she had him back, sitting three feet away. For once, she knew what she had, the kind of man he was, even in the face of all this. Knew she didn't need another thing for the rest of her life except to be with him. There was such a peace that accompanied that knowledge.

Jack must have felt her stare, because he looked down at her, grinning, but then his brow furrowed.

He touched her cheek.

She wiped the tears away and shook her head and climbed up into her seat.

Grassland. Far as she could see. Not a building in sight. Not a road. They were driving across the prairie.

Jack brought the Jeep to a stop in the grass and killed the engine.

The silence was astounding. It threw her into a state of semi-shock, her ears still ringing after last night.

She glanced into the backseat. Naomi and Cole lay curled up in their respective floorboards. She held her hands against their backs, confirmed the rise and the fall.

“Where are we?” she asked.

Her voice sounded muffled inside her head, like it was sourcing from a remote outpost.

Jack’s came back equally distant, “North of Havre. I figure the border’s about ten miles that way.” He pointed through the gaping windshield toward a horizon of grass, everything glazed with frost.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked.

“Engine’s been in the red awhile now. Plus, I have to pee.”

Jack stood pissing the ice off the grass and trying to come to grips with the massive silence. White smoke trickled out of the Jeep’s grille, and he could hear something hissing under the hood. Wondered if he’d toasted the water pump pushing the Jeep as hard as he had. He’d been taking it easy since leaving the paved roads north of Havre and driving onto the prairie, hoping it’d be the slower but safer route.

He walked back to the Jeep, climbed behind the wheel. Dee had set a few bottles of water and a pack of crackers on the center console, and they shared a meager breakfast together and watched the sun lift out of the plains.

It took an hour for the engine to cool, and then Jack cranked the Jeep and they went on. His attention stuck on the temperature gauge, the needle climbing much faster than he would’ve liked, passing the halfway point after only a mile, and edging into the red at two.

Finally shut it down at 2.75 miles. Jack wondered if he’d killed the engine, because smoke was pouring out of the grill now.

Jack got out, raised the hood.

Wafts of smoke and steam billowed out, and it smelled bad, too, like things had cooked that shouldn't have. He had no idea what he was looking at, didn't even really know what the fuck a water pump was, or what function it served beyond stopping this from happening.

He left the hood raised and walked around to Dee's door.

"That doesn't look good," she said.

"It's not. We're going to have to wait awhile until it cools again."

Two hours later, the engine had stopped smoking, and when Jack engaged the ignition, the temperature gauge dropped almost back to baseline.

The kids were awake and thrilled to discover the bag of junk food Jack had scored at the ski area. Cole's smiling mouth was smeared with chocolate.

Jack shifted into drive and studied their progress in tenth-mile increments on the odometer, the landscape scrolling by so slowly.

At one mile, the needle had almost touched the red again, and smoke was coming out of the engine, the wind driving it up the hood and into the car.

Jack stopped, turned off the engine.

So this became the architecture of their day.

Drive one mile.

Overheat.

Wait two hours.

Drive another mile.

Overheat.

Rinse.

Repeat.

In the late afternoon, they were stopped again at the edge of a gentle depression. The hood raised. No wind. White smoke coiling up into the sky. Dee sat in the front passenger seat, dozing. Jack lay with his children in the cool, soft grass, staring into the sky. Cole was snuggled up against his chest, the boy asleep.

"How far are we?" Naomi asked.

"Two, three miles."

“You really think there are camps across the border?”

“Won’t know until we get there.”

“What if there aren’t? What if it’s no different on the other side? It’s just an imaginary line, right?”

“Na, somewhere north of here, we’ll come to a place where we don’t have to run anymore, and we’ll drive or walk or crawl until we get there.”

She moved closer, her head against his shoulder.

“We’re almost there, aren’t we, Daddy?”

Behind them, something chinked against the side of the Jeep.

“Almost, angel.”

A shot rang out across the prairie. Long ways off.

Jack sat up.

The echo going on and on.

“Was that a gun?” Naomi asked.

“I think so.”

Jack glanced back at the Jeep. Because of its dark color, he didn’t notice the bullethole right away, but he did see that Dee was awake, sitting up now.

“Mom’s up,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

He got onto his feet and walked to Dee’s door. The reflection of the sky in the windowglass—a gray sheet of clouds.

He pulled open the front passenger door.

Dee was pale, and she was looking up at him with a brand of fear in her eyes he’d only seen twice before. Both times, she’d been in the throes of childbirth. The look had been pure desperation, like she’d committed herself to something she couldn’t bear to finish.

He still didn’t understand.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“It hurts, Jack.”

She looked down, and he did, too.

Her seat was full of bright red arterial blood and she was squeezing her right leg.

“Oh, Jesus,” Jack said.

Naomi said, “What’s wrong.”

Jack yelled, “You and your brother run to the other side of the car.”

“Why? What—”

“Just do what I fucking tell you.”

Something struck the rear passenger door a foot away from Jack. He slid his right arm under Dee’s legs and lifted her out of the seat.

The report broke out as he carried her around the smoking grille, Dee moaning when he set her down in the grass on the other side of the Jeep.

“What happened?” Naomi said.

“She’s shot.”

“Oh God.” She covered her mouth with her hand.

Cole started to cry.

Jack’s hand was slicked with warm blood that was beading and dripping off the ends of his fingers.

A round zipped through one of the back windows.

“Na, Cole, get behind the tires and lay flat against the grass.” He looked at his wife. “You have to tell me what to do.”

“I don’t know if it nicked the femoral artery or what, but you’ve got to stop the bleeding right now or I’m going to go into hypovolemic shock and die.”

“How do I do that?”

“Wrap something around my leg.”

“Like a shirt?”

“Yes. Please hurry.”

Jack ripped open his button-up shirt and tore his arms out of the sleeves as another bullet hit the Jeep.

Dee cried out when he lifted her leg and ran one of the sleeves underneath it.

“How tight?” he asked, tying the first knot.

“Cut my circulation off.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

He slid the loop to the top of her thigh and bore down on the knot, then put his foot on it while he cinched it down again. He kept watching Dee’s right hand which she’d been pressing into the wound, trying to stop the blood that pulsed between her fingers with every heartbeat.

“Is it working?” he asked.

“I can’t tell.” She blinked several times, staring into the fading sky. He thought her eyes looked glassy. “Yeah,” she said finally. “It’s stopping.”

“Can I leave you for a minute?”

“Why?”

“I need to see if anyone’s coming.”

He opened the rear passenger door—no safe way to do this.

Moved quickly into the backseat and reached into the cargo area, grabbing two AR-15s and a pair of binoculars, then diving back outside as another gunshot resounded across the prairie.

Jack crawled around to the back of the Jeep, lay with his chest heaving against the ground and brought the binoculars to his eyes.

Pulled the prairie into focus.

Distant grass, waving in the wind. A backdrop of clouds going dark as night fell. A jackrabbit standing on its hind legs.

He made a slow scan of the horizon.

A pickup truck scrolled into view—old, beat-to-hell Chevy with equal parts paint and rust. He lowered the binoculars to gauge the true distance—a mile, possibly more—then glassed the truck again.

A woman stood in the bed staring through the scope of a high-powered rifle that she’d braced against the roof. The rifle bucked, soundless. A bullet hit the other side of the Cherokee with a hard ping, like it had struck one of the wheels.

The report was slow in reaching him.

While the woman loaded another long, brass-tipped cartridge, he panned down the prairie, starting when he saw them. The men already so close they took up the entire sphere of magnification—three of them in hunting camouflage, a man perhaps five years his senior and two teenagers who shared a strong resemblance.

The teen boys carried semiautomatic pistols and the man a double-barreled shotgun, their faces flushed from running.

Jack lowered the binoculars. They were less than a hundred yards away. No idea how he’d missed them.

He took up one of the machineguns, wondering how much ammo remained.

Looked over at Dee, the children huddled around her.

“They’re coming, Dee.”

“How many?” she asked.

“Three of them.”

“I can help shoot,” Cole said.

“I need you to stay with Mama.”

Jack crouched behind the rear, right wheel, fingering the trigger.

“Is this it, Jack?”

“No, this is not it.”

He eased up until he could just see through the panels of spiderwebbed glass. The footsteps had become audible, swishing through the grass. The men would be upon them in seconds.

He crouched back down behind the tire.

Shut his eyes, took three deep breaths.

Came suddenly to his feet and swung out around the corner of the Jeep with the AR-15 shouldered. The three men already scrambling to raise their weapons vanished behind the burst of fire, the steady recoil driving into his shoulder, and then the magazine was evacuated, the barrel smoking, the men cut down fifteen feet from the Jeep.

A bullet struck the taillight by Jack’s leg, and he was back around the other side of the Jeep by the time the gunshot reached them.

“Are they dead, Daddy?”

“Yes.”

He lifted the other machinegun out of the grass.

“That one’s empty,” Dee said. “We’re out.”

He couldn’t stand the pain in her voice.

Knelt down behind the tire again and raised the binoculars. The light was going fast. Took him a moment to find the pickup truck again, and when he had, it wasn’t alone. Two other trucks had pulled up alongside it, their doors thrown open, and now he counted eight people, heavily-armed, in heated discussion.

“What?” Dee said. “What do you see? Jack.”

“There’s eight of them now. Three trucks.”

“We have to go.”

“Where, Dee? We’d get a mile, maybe two, before we broke down again.”

“Then what, Jack?”

“We fight.”

The people were climbing back into the trucks now.

“They’re coming,” he said.

Dee was struggling to sit up.

“You shouldn’t be moving,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter. Give me a hand.”

“Dee, you shouldn’t—”

“Give me your fucking hand.” He pulled her onto her feet, her right pant leg dark with blood. She used him for support, groaning as she limped over to the Jeep and opened the driver side door.

She climbed in behind the steering wheel.

“Dee, the car will break down. We are not—”

“I know we’re not.”

He felt something inside of him unhook.

“No.”

Dee looked past him to her daughter. “Naomi, take Cole and gather up the weapons from the dead men.”

“Mom.”

“Right. Now.” When the children were gone, she said, “I can’t walk, Jack. It would be so easy for me to bleed out.”

“We’re going to get you help.”

“We’re all going to be dead in five minutes.”

“Dee—”

“Listen to me. It’s dusk. Soon, it’ll be night. Let me—”

“No, Dee—”

“Let me take the Jeep. Those trucks will follow my lights. Think they’re chasing us all down. By the time they catch up to me, it’ll be dark, and you and the kids—” her voice broke “—you’ll be safe.”

“But we’re almost there, baby.”

“You run all night, Jack. Promise me you won’t stop.”

Over the roof of the Jeep, in the blue dusk across the plain, he could see three points of light.

“No.”

“You ready to watch them die? Are you?”

“I’m not ready for this, Dee.”

“I know.”

Naomi and Cole were coming back over.

He grabbed her face and kissed her. There were tears running down their faces but they wiped them away as the kids arrived.

“There are trucks coming,” Naomi said.

“I know, baby,” Dee said. She looked at Jack. He took the handguns from Naomi and set them in Dee’s lap.

“We’re going due north,” he told her. “You come to us.”

Dee nodded. She looked down at Cole, her eyes glistening again. “Got a hug for Mommy?” The boy handed Jack the shotgun and leaned into the Jeep. Dee pulled Cole into her and kissed the top of his head. She glanced up at her daughter. “Na?”

“What are you doing?”

“Mom’s going to run some interference for us.”

“We’re not staying together?”

Jack grabbed Naomi’s arm and glared at her, his chin trembling. “Hug your mother, Na.”

Naomi looked at Jack. She looked at Dee. She wrapped her arms around her mother, and as she sobbed into her chest, Jack heard the first distant grumble of the approaching trucks.

Already, it was dark and cold.

“Come on, angel.” Jack pulled Naomi away from Dee. “Take your brother into that depression, and you lie down in the grass at the bottom. I’ll be right there.”

“Daddy—”

“I know. Don’t think right now. Just go.”

Naomi gathered herself. “All right, Cole, let’s see what’s over here.”

“Where?” the boy said.

Dee watched her children run off down the hill into the dark.

“Let me take the car,” Jack said.

“I can’t walk,” Dee said. “The kids would have to leave me to find help. They’d be on their own. You want that?”

“Dee—”

“Stop wasting our last moment.”

He nodded.

“Do you know what I’m going to think about?” she said.

“What?”

“That day we had up at the cabin. That perfect day.”

“Wiffle ball in the field.”

She smiled. “Please get our children someplace safe. Make this mean something.”

“I swear to you I will.”

“I have to go now.”

“You have to stop crying so you can drive.”

In the distance, it was too dark to see the trucks, but their headlights were close enough to have separated into six points of light.

Jack kissed his wife once more and buried his face into the softness of her neck and just breathed her in. Then he looked into her eyes for precious seconds until she pushed him away. She pulled the door closed and cranked the engine.

He got down in the grass and he was crying as the Jeep rolled away, picking up speed. After ten seconds, the cornerlamps cut on—dim, orange light—and the noise of the engine became rackety across the prairie, sputtering and hacking.

Jack watched the approaching trucks, still moving toward him, getting louder as the Jeep dwindled away. No evident course diversion yet.

He glanced back into the depression, couldn’t see his children.

When he looked forward again, the trucks were turning, all of them, and difficult to see now with their headlights blazing east.

He lay there watching the lights move across the plain, the engines becoming quiet, the lights fading.

Their Jeep disappeared.

The trucks vanished.

He had to strain now to even hear the engines.

Then he was lying on the ground, and there was no sound but the wind blowing through the grass. He lifted the shotgun and rose to his feet, started toward the depression. Couldn’t see a thing under the cloud cover. He wouldn’t have seen anything regardless, with the tears streaming down his face. He called out for his children in the darkness, and when they answered, he let their voices guide him.

In the rearview mirror, Dee watched the trio of headlights pursuing her. The temperature gauge was pegged, and in the Jeep’s headlights, she could see streamers of smoke pouring out of the engine, smell things burning. Her leg throbbed, and she kept steady pressure on the gas pedal, trying to

maintain her speed at twenty, but the engine had begun to lose power, cylinders misfiring, RPMs erratic, and still those trucks stayed with her, getting closer.

At 1.2 miles, the RPMs fell off and the engine seized, a violent clanging under the hood. Dee finally eased her foot off the accelerator, let the Jeep roll to a stop and die.

She turned the key back in the ignition.

Short of breath, her heart pounding.

The headlights of those trucks getting brighter in the rearview mirror, and the ominous symphony of their engines already audible.

She couldn't feel her leg, didn't know whether that was owing to the loss of blood flow or the adrenaline surging through her.

Her hands trembled as she lifted the guns out of her lap.

One of the trucks shot past, a hundred and fifty yards south, and kept going.

She turned around and looked back between the seats.

The other pair of headlights were motionless, a hundred feet back. They intensified, brights blazing into the Jeep for what seemed ages.

At last, she heard a series of distant door slams, and then the lights went dark.

Dee tossed the guns into the passenger seat and opened the center console, fingers probing until they grazed Ed's pocketknife. Her thumbnail found the indentation in the steel and she pried open the longest blade and sawed through the fabric of the shirt Jack had tied around her leg.

The feeling returned—a flood of needles and heat—and she reached down between her seat and the door until her hand touched the lever. As the seat tilted back, the lights of the third truck appeared a quarter mile out through the windshield, moving in her direction.

She could hear voices now, and she could feel the blood spraying out of her, a warm pooling in her seat, the smell of iron filling the car. Already she was lightheaded and breathing fast and breaking out in a cold sweat.

Her arms slipped down to her sides and she was trying to find that day in Wyoming on the side of the mountain, but her thoughts kept tangling. As the footsteps approached she was so lightheaded she could barely think at all. Didn't want to go back into the past anyway.

And as flashlight beams swept across the Jeep, she landed upon the image she wanted, clinging to it as the dizziness behind her eyes began to spiral and echoing voices screamed at her to get out of the car.

Sunrise on a prairie.

Three figures—a man, a boy, a young woman.

Tired and cold.

They've walked all night, and they're still walking, just a few steps from the crest of a hill.

They reach the top.

Breathless.

The view goes on forever.

The man pulls his children close and points.

At first, they can't see what he's trying to show them, because the sun is exploding out of the horizon in radials of early light.

But as their eyes adjust, they see it—a city of white tents spread across the plain.

Thousands of them.

Numerous trails of smoke rise into the morning sky, and a band of soldiers have already seen them. They're climbing the hillside toward her family, hailing them, and one of their number carries a blue and white flag flapping in the wind.

She wants to follow them—she'd give anything—but they've already started down the hillside without her, slipping away now, and she loses them in the blinding light of the sun.

They'd been running in the dark for three minutes when Cole dug his heels into the ground.

"Come on," Jack said, pulling his arm, "we aren't stopping."

"We have to."

Cole wouldn't move.

Jack let go of Naomi's hand and scooped the boy up in his arms and started jogging again.

Cole screamed, his arms flailing.

"Goddamnit, Cole—"

The boy grabbed his hair and tried to bite Jack's face.

He dropped Cole into the grass.

“He’s turning into one of them,” Naomi screamed.

“Look at me, Cole.”

“We have to go back.” The boy was crying now.

“Why?”

“To get Mom.”

“Cole, we can’t go back. It’s too dangerous.”

“But it’s over.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I can feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The lights. They aren’t here anymore.” Jack knelt down in the grass, his boy just a shadow in the dark.

“Cole, this is not the time to screw around.”

“I’m not, Daddy. I don’t feel it anymore.”

“When did it go away?”

“Just now, while we were running. I can still feel it going out of me.”

“I don’t even know what that means, Cole.”

“You have to go get Mom. It’s okay now. The bad people won’t hurt you.”

Jack looked at his daughter.

“Go,” she said.

“Really?”

“If there’s even a chance, right?”

“Listen to me,” Jack said. “Do not move from this spot. It might be tomorrow morning before I come back, because I don’t think I’ll be able to find you in the dark.”

“What if you don’t come back?” she said.

“If I’m not back by mid-morning, you keep going north until you cross the border and find help. Cole, look at me.”

He held the boy’s hands. “If you’re wrong about this, you might never see me again. Do you understand that?”

The boy nodded. “But I’m not wrong.”

Jack ran across the prairie, tearing through the dark, his crumbling shoes flapping with every footfall, already gasping, no idea if he was headed in the right direction, and nothing to see but gaping blackness.

After five minutes, he stopped and bent over, his heart banging in his chest.

When he looked up again, he saw a cluster of red lights far across the plain. A further set of headlights. Over the rocketing of his pulse, he thought he heard the engines.

He was still gasping, realized he wasn't going to get his wind back, so he started running again, working up to as much of a sprint as he could manage. He was terrified the taillights would vanish, but they stayed put, didn't even seem to be moving away from him now.

Sweat ran into his eyes, and when he wiped the sting away, the lights had disappeared.

He stopped.

Didn't hear the engines anymore.

Just an ocean of soundless dark.

Seven flashes exploded through the black. For a fraction of a second, he saw Dee's Jeep and the three trucks surrounding it. Much closer than he thought, just a few hundred yards out. He was running again as the seven gunshots reached him and ripped his guts out, the last four hundred yards blazing past in a rush of terror, pain, and self-doubt, thinking he should have stayed with his children. He was going to see his wife dead and get himself killed, never see any of them again. And so close to safety, too.

He stopped twenty yards out from the vehicles, so far beyond the boundary of his endurance.

It sounded like sirens ringing inside his head, the darkness spinning.

He leaned over and puked into the grass.

Straightened up again, staggered past the trucks toward the Jeep.

The driver side door had been thrown open, the stench of cordite strong in the air, and he was moving through a haze of smoke, waiting for the gunshots, the attack.

He stopped again when he saw them, not understanding what it meant, figuring he must be missing something, his brain failing to process information after he'd pushed himself so hard.

Had to count them twice.

Seven people sprawled in the grass around the Jeep. Each of them dead from a headshot, their guns lying within reach or still in hand.

In the light that spilled out of the Jeep, he saw the eighth member of the party crouched down against the right front wheel, tears streaming down his face, the long barrel of a large-caliber revolver jammed between his teeth. He wore a fleece vest and a cowboy hat, a patchy blond beard struggling to cover an acne-ruined face.

When he saw Jack, he pulled the gun out of his mouth.

“I can’t do it,” the man said. He offered Jack the gun. “Please.”

“What?”

“Kill me.”

Jack was still gasping for air, his legs burning. He reached forward, slowly, as if sudden movement might cause the young man to rethink his offer, then snatched the revolver out of his hand.

The man said, “Where are you going?” as Jack walked around the open door and looked into the Jeep.

“Oh God, baby.”

The driver seat had been reclined and his wife lay stretched back on it, unmoving, her eyes closed, blood still running out of her leg.

“Dee.”

He glanced down at her right leg, saw where the shirt he’d tied around her thigh had been severed.

He set the gun in the floorboard and reached in, taking up both ends of the bloody shirt sleeve and cinching it down even harder than before, until the blood stopped flowing.

“Dee.” He touched her face. “Dee, wake up.”

Outside, the man was crying, begging for Jack to end him.

Jack moved outside and around the door.

“Which of those trucks is yours?” he asked.

“Oh my God,” the man cried. “Oh my God. My daughter. I—”

Jack held the revolver to the man’s knee. “Look at me.”

The man looked up at him.

“My wife needs medical attention. Do you have keys to any of these trucks?”

The man pointed beyond the Jeep. “The Chevy. Here.” He dug a pair of keys out of his jeans, handed them to Jack.

“What happened?” the man said.

“What are you talking about?”

“To me.”

“I have no fucking idea.”

“You have to kill me. I can’t stand knowing what I—”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“Please—”

“But I will take your mind off it.”

Jack pulled the trigger and the man screamed, clutching his knee. Jack stood and walked around the car door. He shoved the revolver down the back of his jeans, leaned in, lifted his wife out of the pool of blood.

He was drenched in sweat, his legs trembling with exhaustion. Stumbled away from the Jeep with Dee in his arms and the young man pleading to die. It was all he could do to carry her those fifty feet to the pickup truck.

It was a pristine 1966 Chevy.

Powder blue.

He opened the passenger door and laid Dee across the vinyl, then limped around and hauled himself up into the cab.

The third key he tried started the engine.

He hit the lights, shifted into gear, floored the accelerator.

They raced across the prairie. He held her hand which was growing cold, saying her name over and over, an incantation. He had no idea if she even had a pulse, and still promising things he had no business promising—that they were almost over the border, almost to safety, where a city of tents awaited them, a refuge crawling with doctors who could fix her. She’d lost a lot of blood, but she was strong, had made it this far, she could surely hang on just a little farther, live to see the end of this and whatever new life they made, live to forget the worst of this, to see Na and Cole forget the worst of this, see her children grow up strong and happy, because they had so many more years the four of them, so many experiences to share that didn’t involve running and death and fear, and please God darling, if any part of you can hear me, don’t let this be the end.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.
There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.
Revelations

THE team disbands as the light begins to fail. But she lingers in the pit, gently brushing the dirt from the ribcage of a skeleton she's just uncovered in the last hour, lost in her work. The distant hum of an airplane breaks her concentration, and she looks up into the sky—easy to see the twin-engine turboprop catching sunlight on its descent.

She climbs out of the pit and walks over to the showers. Pulls the curtain. Strips out of her boots, elbow-length rubber gloves, her clothes, and stands under the heavy spray of water, letting it pound away the reek of decomp.

In fresh, clean clothes, she starts across the field.

The airplane is parked in the distance, the cabin door beginning to open.

She breaks into a run.

The old man comes down the stairs of the plane already smiling, must have seen her as they taxied up. Drops his bag as she runs into his arms, and they embrace for the first time in six months on the broken pavement of the runway.

"My angel," he whispers. "My angel."

When they come apart, she stares up at him, thinking, God, was his hair this white last Christmas? But he isn't looking at her. He's staring across the field, an intensity coalescing in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asks. "Daddy?"

He can barely speak, eyes shimmering with tears, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"This is the place."

They cross the field, moving toward the pit.

"They pulled the trucks up to here," he says. "A half dozen tractor trailers. There were tents set up over there," he points, "right about where yours are. They told us there was hot food and beds waiting." He stops. "Is that smell. . .?"

"Yeah."

"Right about this time of day, too. Dusk. A beautiful sunset." He continues walking, the stench growing worse with every step, until they stand at the edge of the grave.

She watches his face. He’s somewhere else—nineteen years in the past.

“They lined us up right here,” he says. “They’d already dug the grave.”

“How many people do you think?”

“Maybe two hundred of us.” He closes his eyes, and she wonders what he sees, what he hears.

“Do you remember where you stood?”

He shakes his head. “I just remember the sounds and what the sky looked like, staring up at it through the bodies that had fallen on top of me.”

“Did they use chainsaws?”

He looks down at her, startled by the question.

“Yeah. How did you—”

“We were curious about how some of the bones had been bisected.”

The man eases himself down into the grass and she sits beside him.

“You’ve been down in the grave?” he asks.

“I worked in it all day. That’s what I do, Daddy.”

He chuckles. “You know I’m proud to death of you, angel, but Jesus do you have a fucked-up job.”

She leans her head against his shoulder, laces her fingers through his, twiddling the platinum band he now wears on the nub of his left ring finger.

The team builds a bonfire after supper.

Someone strums a guitar.

Someone rolls a joint.

A bottle makes the rounds.

She sits between the old man and Sam, the Australian team leader, feeling contemplative off two swigs of whiskey and staring into the flames. The cold of the night a wonderful contrast to the eddies of heat sliding up her bare legs.

Usually, those thirty days in hell are as unreachable as if they had happened to another family. But sometimes, like tonight, she feels plugged in to the raw emotion of it all, a closed circuit, and if she doesn’t keep it at arm’s length, it still has the power to break her.

Her father is a little drunk, Sam more so, and she tunes back in to their conversation as Sam loosens his tie and says, “. . .learning more about the Great Auroral Storm.”

“Yeah, I’ve read some wild theories,” her father says.

“You talking about mine?”

“Entirely possible. You really believe these auroras contributed to the epic massacres and extinctions in history?”

“I think there’s some compelling solar abnormality data on that. But something of the magnitude that happened here? Keep in mind recorded human history is just the blink of an eye since life crawled out of the oceans. This was a hundred-thousand-year occurrence. Maybe a five-hundred. Natural selection at its darkest.”

“So who got selected?” her father asks. “Who won? Us?”

Sam laughs. “No.”

“The affected?”

“Most of them selected themselves out when they committed mass suicide.”

“Then who?”

“Your son,” Sam says.

“Excuse me?”

“People like Cole. Those who witnessed that terrible light show on October Fourth, and either didn’t kill, or did, and resisted the crushing guilt. That’s who won.”

“I have a close friend back home in Belgium in the humanities department where I teach. A priest. He thinks the aurora was just God testing us.”

“Those who saw the aurora, or those who ran?”

“Both, Sam.”

“Well, it all comes down to purification in the end, right?”

“You say it like that’s a good thing.”

“On a human level, no, but in terms of our DNA, it’s a different ball game. Remember, the barbarians finally took Rome. That was horrible, but Rome had become a corrupt, ineffectual, soft culture. Genetically speaking, it was a positive thing.”

“Or,” the old man says, “maybe we just need to kill each other. Maybe that’s our perfect state of being.”

Sam pauses to have a smoke, and when he finally exhales, says, “It surprises me that you would want to see this place again.”

“Why?”

“Because of what you saw and experienced here.”

“You should be examining my bones in that hole,” the old man says.

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“This was an awful place, no question, but a miracle happened here. I never want to forget that.”

She’s buzzed and getting tired. Stretches her bare feet toward the fire, lays her head in her father’s lap. Soon he’s running his fingers through her hair, still debating with Sam. She’s almost asleep when something vibrates against the back of her head.

“Excuse me, Sam,” her father says.

The old man reaches into his pocket and retrieves his mobile phone, answers, “I forgot, didn’t I? . . . I’m sorry. . . . Yes, here safe and sound, sitting by a fire. . . . Difficult but good. . . . Yes, I’m glad I came. . . . . That’s still the plan. We’ll meet you both in Calgary tomorrow evening. . . . . Oh, I know. It’ll be so good to all be together again. . . . Yes, she’s right here, but she’s sleeping. . . . Okay, I’ll tell her. . . . No, I won’t forget. I’ll do it as soon as we get off. . . . Goodnight, darling.”

The old man slides his phone back into his pocket.

She’s almost asleep now, in that cushioned bliss between consciousness and all that lies beneath. Feels her father’s hand on her shoulder, and his breath, still after all these years, familiar against her ear.

“Naomi,” he whispers, “your mother sends her love.”

About Blake Crouch

Blake Crouch is the author of over a dozen bestselling suspense, mystery, and horror novels. His short fiction has appeared in numerous short story anthologies, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Cemetery Dance*, and many other publications. Much of his work, including the Wayward Pines series, has been optioned for TV and film. Blake lives in Colorado. To learn more, follow him on Twitter, Facebook, or visit his website, www.blakecrouch.com.

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Box Sets

Thicker Than Blood: The Complete Andrew Z. Thomas Series

The Fear Trilogy: Run, Snowbound, and Abandon